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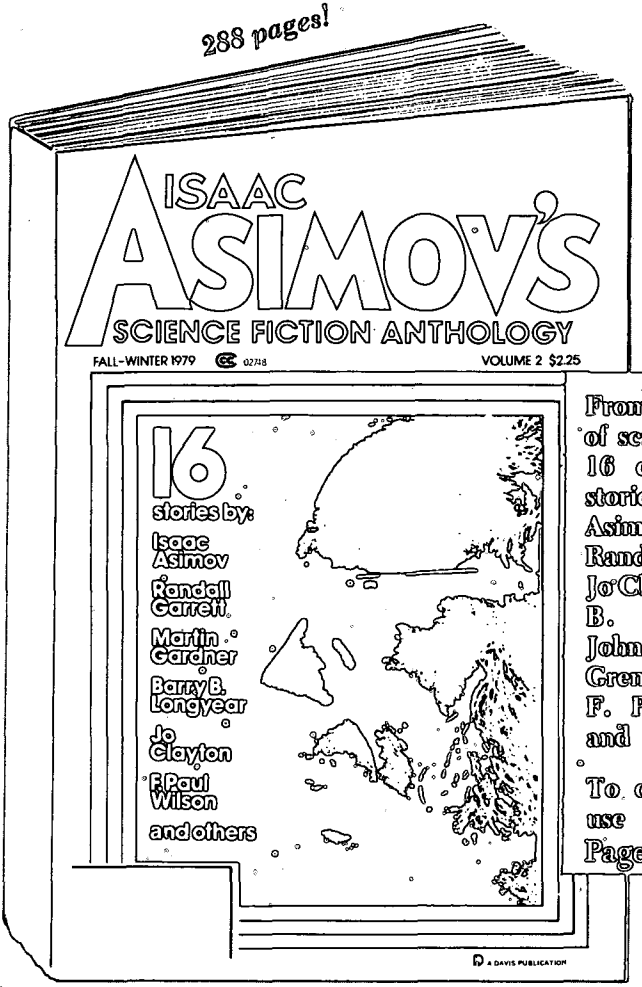

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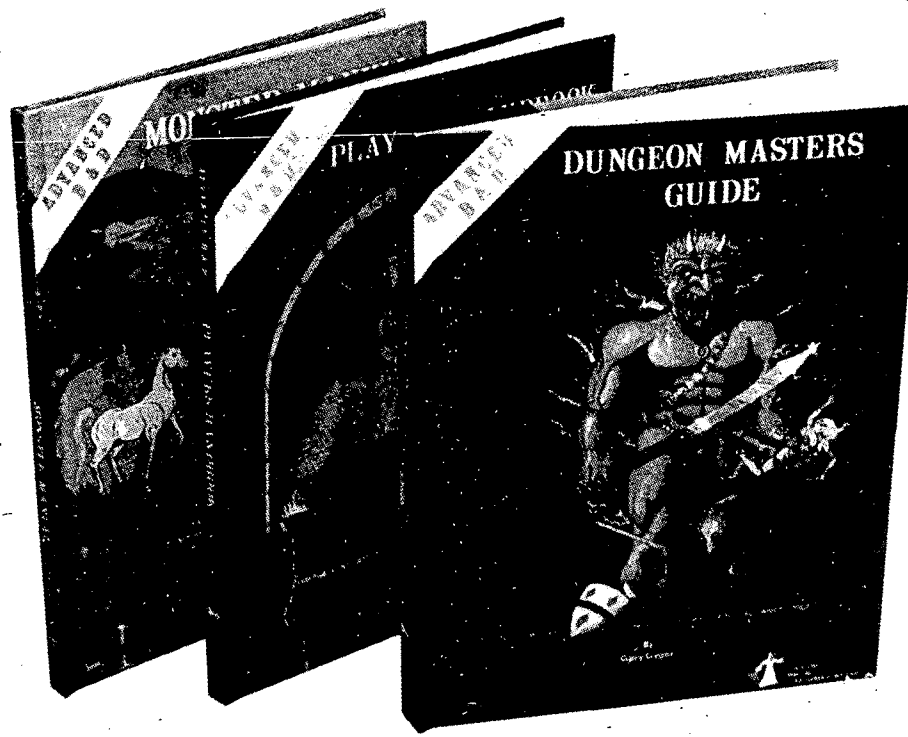

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EDITORIAL: ONE MORE TIME

by Isaac Asimov

art: Frank Kelly Freas

When, in the July 1979 issue, I proposed my acrostic sonnet contest, I honestly thought I would get three sonnets of which only one would rhyme and scan properly and that would be the winner.

What an idiot I was! The sonnets flooded in by the hundreds. My heart sank. How could I pick out the winner? Even after I rejected sonnets for a single imperfect rhyme or one misplaced stress or an isolated piece of stiff inversion, there were still a great many left.

One contributor, F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre, sent in a letter of such insufferable self-assuredness that I had to examine it carefully to make sure I hadn't written it myself. Having confirmed the fact that I was not writing under a false name and that F. G. MacI. was real, I then ached to reject him, but I couldn't. He sent a sonnet for each of the rhyme schemes I had suggested and they were all good. The Petrarchan sonnet he sent me wins. The rhymes and scanning are perfect; it reads in natural English; it's funny and tells a story—and it wins and gets the fifteen bucks. Here it is:

Gee whiz! I hope he buys this thing I wrote!
Exactly why he *should,* I couldn't say . . .
Oh, gosh! I wonder just how much he'll *pay?*
(Remind me to attach a little note.)
Gee whillikers! It really gets my goat . . .
Eight days I've waited! What's the big delay?
Suppose that he rejects it right away?
(Come back next week and watch me slit my throat.)
If he just *likes* it, I'll be satisfied.
Too bad I don't know how he works or thinks . . .
Hey, he might even *buy* it! Well, he *might* . . .
Eureka! Here's his letter! What's inside?
"*Regarding your short story, bub: it stinks!*
Say, pal, whoever told you you could write?"

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You will notice that the acrostic is GEORGE SCITHERS, and the author's name is, once again, F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre.

Two people get special honorable mention. Jackie Chakhtoura sent in a double acrostic sonnet. The initial letters of the first words spelled THE TIME MACHINE and the initial letters of the second words of each line spelled YESTERDAY'S HERE.

Sharon Davis sent in two; each remarkable. In each line, all the words started with the same letter and the letters spelled SCIENCE FICTION. It might have won if it had only made sense, too. She also sent a sonnet with the acrostic reading DR. ISAAC ASIMOV. That's only thirteen letters, but the third line started with an appropriate line of dots (. . .) and that supplied the period. Very clever.

Here are the remaining honorable mentions:

Honorable Mention	*Acrostic*
Donald Franson	ISAAC ASIMOV'S S.F.
Don F. Briggs	SCIENCE FICTION
Sharon Webb	GEORGE SCITHERS
Leslie Dendy	CHARLES R. DARWIN
Lois Aleta Fundis	ISAAC ASIMOV, PH.D.
Cyndy Altenburg	MS. URSULA LEGUIN
Henry W. Enberg II	RANDALL GARRETT
Barbara Lein	ISAAC ASIMOV, PH.D.
Eve Iehle	ISAAC ASIMOV, PH.D.
L. E. Hurd	CHARLES R. DARWIN
Michael Heffley	GEORGE SCITHERS
Doris R. Goldberg	L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP
Virginia Martin	THE TICK-TOCK MAN
Forrest Fusco, Jr.	ISAAC ASIMOV, PH.D.
Rose E. Hossner	BARRY B. LONGYEAR
John M. Cavallero	ROBERT SHECKLEY

George and I show up quite a bit for, I suppose, obvious reasons.

What surprised me most was that so many people wrote so enthusiastically of their enjoyment and wanted *another* contest. Well, I must be crazy, but let's try again. One more time, friends.

Did you ever hear of a "double dactyl"?

Well, a dactyl is a metrical foot consisting of three syllables of which the first is accented: **DAH**-dih-dih. "Heavenly" is a dactylic word and so are "usable" and "subsequent." Imagine, then, an eight-line poem with six of the lines made up of two dactyls (hence "double

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dactyl") and the other two of a single dactyl and a final stressed syllable. The first four lines would sound like this:

DAH-dih-dih-**DAH**-dih-dih
DAH-dih-dih-**DAH**-dih-dih
DAH-dih-dih-**DAH**-dih-dih
DAH-dih-dih-**DAH**

and the next four lines would repeat the rhythm exactly.

Now for some rules:

1) The lines must scan perfectly, and the poem must make sense.

2) The fourth and eighth lines must rhyme perfectly, and there must be no other rhymes.

3) The first line is a nonsense phrase. Traditionally, it is "Higgledy-piggledy" but you might, if you wish, substitute some similar phrase with science-fictional overtones, as, for instance, "Robotish-lobotish" but if so, I will only be impressed if the overtones have something to do with the sense of the piece.

4) The second line must be a proper name though we can be loose on that. Titles, initials, associated epithets are permissible. Naturally for the purposes of this contest, the proper name should be associated with either science or science fiction and the double dactyl should deal with a subject that is associated with the proper name you use.

5) The sixth or seventh line should consist of a single six-syllable word that fits into the double-dactyl meter. There aren't a great many such words so if you want to invent one, that's all right, provided the meaning of the word is absolutely clear, and that the meaning fits the poem.

In order to help you get the notion, I have written a double dactyl that fits all the above rules and here it is:

Dactyly-fractyly
Good Doctor Asimov
Asks for some poetry
Witty, but hard.

Where can we find such a
Light-versifyingish
Superdelectable
Dactylic bard?

I used my own name and "Asimov" is a perfect dactyl, but I'd rather you didn't unless you can think of something particularly

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clever and don't want to give it up. I guarantee, by the way, that once you get started you will develop a glazed look in your eye and you'll be muttering in dactylic meter even in your sleep.

As before, please send all contributions to me (groan!) and address them to: Isaac Asimov, Double Dactyls; Davis Publications, Inc.; 380 Lexington Ave.; New York NY 10017. That way, Shawna and George don't have to bother with them. This time, please, keep carbons or duplicates of some sort; and don't ask me to return the contribution. I promise never to use any of them but the winner.

The submission deadline is March 1, 1980, and I will print the winner in a future editorial, together with honorable mentions. The winner will get fifteen dollars as before. I don't know if I can think up any more mad contests, by the way; I make no promises.

Finally, I wish to thank Mary Kittredge of New Haven, Connecticut, for reminding me of the double dactyls and suggesting it as a possible contest.

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IN MEMORIAM
Margaret Winter Campbell

Her name was Margaret Winter Campbell, but those of us who knew her called her "Peg." The nickname was quite appropriate for her, for she was cheerful, resourceful, and talented; and everything about her, including her stature, accepted the diminunative as it was given: A mark of affection.

Peg was the sister of Dr. Joseph Winter, who gave up his practice of medicine in Benton Harbor, Michigan, to come east to join in the Dianetics Movement with John W. Campbell. Peg Winter came east later; it was through Dr. Winter that Peg and John W. met. They married after that, and shortly after their marraige, they discovered that the Campbell split-level house in Westfield, New Jersey, was not large enough for both of them. For Peg had come complete with her own articles of business and John W. had all the spare rooms filled with amateur radio gear. As a consequence, they sold the house and bought a large place in Mountainside, where there was enough room for John's hobbies and Peg's business.

Peg Winter was an expert in crewel embroidery. She gave lectures and lessons in the craft, acted as agent in selling supplies, and created catalogs and patterns for crewel handiwork. The crewel business gave Peg an independent income so that when John travelled for *Analog,* she could arrange to travel with him, giving lectures and lessons in crewel while John was busy elsewhere with the magazine.

Peg was, in her own way, John W. Campbell's physical and intellectual peer. Physically, Peg was an attractive match for John's massive six-and-plus. Intellectually, Peg had a well-modulated voice that commanded attention: John's attention, for when she disagreed with him, he listened: and when she agreed with him, no one could doubt that she had come to that opinion upon her own. She was also the only person in the known world who could make John slow down when he got over-enthusiastic by simply saying, "Oh, come now, John!"

When John died, there was no point in keeping the house in Mountainside. She sold the house and the crewel business and moved to Fairhope, Alabama, bought a house there, and joined her daughter, Jane Winter Robertson and Ian Robertson, Jane's husband.

Ian and Jane also owned a house in Maine, used for vacations;

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and Peg, now retired, often spent the summer there. She was there, in August 1979, entertaining old friends, when she died quietly in her sleep of a cardiac arrest.

We did not see you, Peg, after Mountainside, but we knew where you were. We'll miss you, all of us who knew you.

Requiescat in pace—

—George O. Smith

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V. C. Stabile
Vice President and Treasurer

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ON BOOKS
By Baird Searles

The Face by Jack Vance, DAW, $1.95 (paper).
The Dying Earth by Jack Vance, Pocket Books, $1.75 (paper).
Dragonworld by Byron Preiss and Michael Reeves, Bantam, $7.95 (paper).
At the Narrow Passage by Richard C. Meredith, Playboy Press, $1.95 (paper).
The White Hart by Nancy Springer, Pocket Books, $2.25 (paper).
Wonderworks: Science Fiction and Fantasy Art by Michael Whelan edited by Polly and Kelly Freas, Donning, $7.95 (paper), $15.00 (cloth).
The Science Fiction Encyclopedia edited by Peter Nicholls, Doubleday, $12.95 (paper), $24.95 (cloth).
Survey of Science Fiction Literature edited by Frank N. Magill, Salem Press, $200.00.

A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction by Baird Searles, Martin Last, Beth Meacham, and Michael Franklin, with an introduction by Samuel R. Delany, Avon, $2.95 (paper). (Reviewed by Darrell Schweitzer.)

Well, Jack Vance has finally gone and dropped the other shoe. What may be the most long-awaited book in science fiction history has at last seen print—the fourth of Mr. Vance's "Demon Prince" series, *The Face*. The first and second in the series, *The Star King* and *The Killing Machine,* appeared in book form way back in 1964; the third, *The Palace of Love,* in 1967. Since then, a growing number of indignant Vance fans have been panting for the next.

The series takes place in a vastly-peopled galaxy of the future, wherein humanity has split into endless diversity, each branch more eccentric than the next. Its (the series') *raison d'etre* is remarkably similar to a spaghetti Western I saw on the television last night, but it is a theme that goes way back—the child, seeing his home and family despoiled in one way or another, wreaking vengeance as an adult.

In this case, Kirth Gersen has seen his home village raped by slavers, his family killed or enslaved. He learns that the slaving expedition was captained by a group of outlaws, the "Demon Princes." Each book is the account of the adult Kirth's tracking

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down and killing of one of them.

In a sense, the long wait for *The Face* may work against it: a dozen years can whet the appetite for something monumental, and Vance is not a monumental writer. More and more his plots have been excuses to involve us in his dippily conceived cultures; the recent books have been as light as the pull of an asteroid's gravity, multicolored as the most intricate spectrum analysis. (Vance is intoxicated by colors; a list of those he uses as description in a single book would read like an interior decorator's nightmare.)

This time we are introduced to the societies of Methel and Dar Sai. The Methlens are an aristocratic people, irresistably bringing to mind Newport society of 1903 with a touch of disco. The Darsh are as harsh as their name, their cooking execrable, and their erotic relationships "of a quality to alarm placid dispositions," as is pointed out in one of the many quotes from guide books and such like with which Vance sprinkles the text, to marvelously funny effect. Dar Sai is so arid that life is possible only under huge umbrella type structures covering many acres. (To digress a moment, the Arabian/Bedouin culture is becoming as much of a cliché in SF these days as the psuedo-Medieval was ten years back. Is it just the long-range influence of *Dune* or pernicious manipulation by the oil sheikhs, I wonder?)

Kirth Gersen (remember him?) beats his way through these disparate worlds in search of Lens Larque, the fourth Demon Prince (remember them?). Only on the last page does everything in the convoluted plot come together to make the longest shaggy-dog story since *Rendezvous with Rama.*

Ah, you may think that does it, don't you? But I see I've neglected to note one little fact. There are *five* Demon Princes; we've still got another whole novel to go!

I don't usually mention covers here, since so often they have precious little to do with the books they cover in more ways than one; but I do feel impelled to make negative noises about the cover for *The Face.* It displays an act of violence with dull but unrelenting realism, is terrifically ugly, and reflects Vance's style and wit about as accurately as a picture from a Sears Roebuck catalogue. Given the pictorial vividness of Vance's writing, this cover seems an act of pure perversity.

And while on the subject of Vance, it must be noted that his first novel, *The Dying Earth,* is now back in print (out of which it should never have been). The word novel is really a misnomer; here are six vaguely connected short stories, set in a far future where sorcery

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has replaced science on an Earth that is in the last stages of decay, both socially and physically.

This may have been the first attempt to mingle SF with fantasy: it was written long before "sword and sorcery" had achieved genrehood, and the result is peculiar but also peculiarly satisfying. It may well still be my favorite among Vance's works; it has all his flamboyant imagery, but also an intensity which the later books have abandoned for flippancy. And the new cover for *The Dying Earth,* by the way, is all a Vance cover should be.

I mentioned above that Arabian-style cultures were All The Thing in SF; but that particular fashion still has a way to go before it becomes the monumental cliché spawned in the '70s in fantasy, which is, of course, dragons. (Why dragons, I wonder, instead of, say, unicorns? There's a sociological study for someone—or is it as simple as the fact that Anne McCaffrey's Dragonbooks hit bestsellerdom?)

In any case, as I implied last month, I feel as if I never want to hear about another dragon for the rest of my life, dear beasties though they may be. So what do we get? *Dragonworld,* one of those oversized, multiply illustrated productions, is what we get. In all fairness, I must note that despite the title, there is only one dragon in the book. He is pretty old and creaky, and doesn't make his entrance until half way through, and given the length of this book, that's a *long* way in.

In fact, that's *Dragonworld*'s major problem. Its excessive length simply doesn't hold up the action, which concerns two nations, Fandora and Simbala. The Fandorans are a pastoral lot; the Sim are sophisticated, with air ships, palaces, and such like. Though there's been almost no contact between them in their history, each decides the other is responsible for the deaths of several children along the strait that divides them, and goes to war.

Since the entire motivation of the plot is based on misunderstanding, the reader gets pretty impatient with this lot, who all seem pretty dimwitted; and even the addition of a great deal of hankypanky by the Royal Family of Simbala over the throne doesn't help. Maybe this sort of fantasy must have a quest or some such just to keep things moving.

In any case, things don't really pick up until the entrance of the coldrakes (*related* to dragons, but *not* dragons, thank God), also a dying race, and the aforementioned last dragon. Their sections have a tragedy and a nobility that the mere human characters lack.

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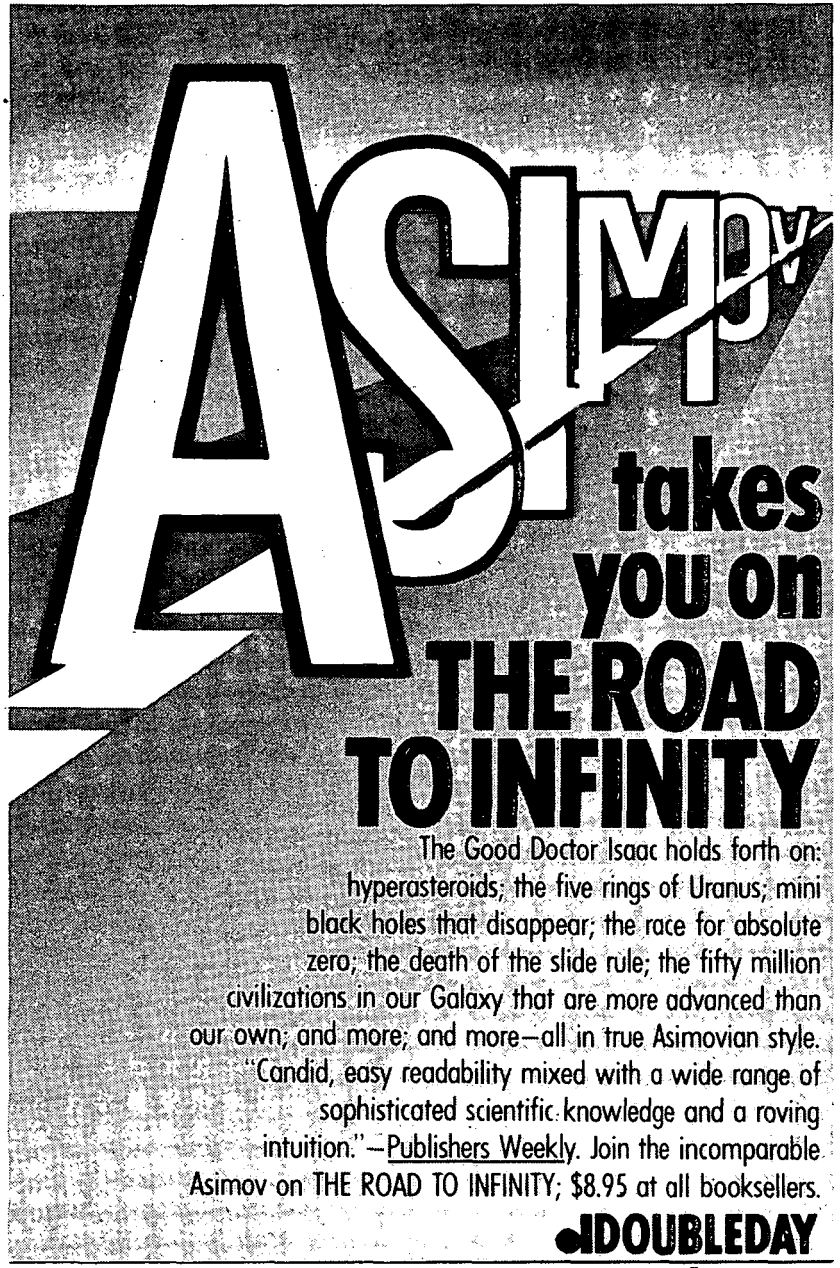
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All this (and I do mean *all* this), by the way, was written by Byron Preiss and J. Michael Reeves. The illustrations are by Joseph Zucker; and they are for the most part nicely done and apropos, though the Fandorans look a little too much like another small race from fantasy who shall remain nameless.

The alternate time stream story is a fairly rare subgenre in SF, though we did find one last month—Phyllis Eisenstein's *Shadow of Earth*. Even rarer is the multiple-time-stream story, and curiously enough we have one of those this month. It's *At the Narrow Passage* by Richard C. Meredith; and jolly good fun it is, too.

The novel begins in a time line in which the British Empire is still immensely powerful (it is, of course, the 1970s there) due to the early invention of the breechloading rifle, which enabled the British to hold the American colonies *and* to dominate France by helping the Royalist side during this line's equivalent of the French Revolution. Here we meet the protagonist, a mercenary soldier who is one of the relatively few human beings who know how to jump the time lines (he himself is from a Greek-dominated line in which Alexander's empire held together).

These humans are in alliance with the Kriths, a non-human race from far to the "temporal east" who are determined to change the future of all the time lines. But our hero suddenly runs into a bunch from the far temporal west who may or may not be human but who contend the Kriths are using humanity for their own ends.

Things get pretty complicated, but Meredith is a writer who can keep this sort of thing clear for the reader (though I have a couple of nagging questions, I must admit). But the book zips along nicely, with that speedy superficiality of not much depth but a lot of engrossing action that I associate with the best space opera.

At the Narrow Passage is the first of a trilogy; it has been available in paperback before, but so far as I know the other two have not. By the time this sees print, *No Brother, No Friend* and *Vestiges of Time* should be available in that form. I hope the quality will be maintained in them.

The White Hart by Nancy Springer is also purportedly the first of a trilogy, and I have not been so pleased or touched by a fantasy since *The Riddle-Master of Hed* and its wonderful sequels. I don't want to give too much of it away since it abounds in twists and surprises. Leave it at that it takes place in a country of myth called Isle and concerns Bevan, half god and half mortal, and what tran-

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spires when he chooses to walk among mankind.

He rescues the Lady Ellid, who comes to love him; she in turn is loved by Cuin, her cousin, who despite his jealousy of Bevin, also learns to love him and becomes his faithful comrade at arms. These three face Pel Blagden, the mantled lord, and other dangers, and their destiny, even in this initial book, is not a simple one.

The flavor, as you can tell from the names, is strongly Welsh, though not as directly inspired by that mythology as Evangeline Walton's tetralogy; and there are intriguing bits and pieces of the history of Isle itself scattered through the narrative. There *are* echoes of the familiar here—a mantled lord of evil (who at least lives in a pit and not on a mountain), a fading race of immortals, and even a group (pride? gaggle?) [smoulder — GHS] of dragons, who happily make a brief (but impressive) appearance—but Springer has her own strong individuality; and one senses influence, not imitation, two very different things.

I'd make a guess that *The White Hart* will be the next big fantasy hit, despite some overproduced recent volumes making a bid for that spot.

So much for real, reading-type books; now for a mixed bag of picture and reference tomes . . . :

Of which my hands-down favorite is *Wonderworks,* science fiction and fantasy art by Michael Whelan, edited by Polly and Kelly Freas. What a helluva beautiful book this is!

I have spoken glowingly of Whelan's illustrative work in this column before (his was the really splendid painting in this year's Tolkien calendar). The brilliance of his palette and the hard-edged "magic realism" of his technique are ideally suited to SF and fantasy illustration; readers who are not up on current cover-artists will still certainly remember his beautiful work for the new Barsoom and Pern editions from Del Rey and his Piper covers for Ace.

These paintings and many others look even more splendid in this collection, enlarged and without printing. Some are double page spreads; and all have model shots, preliminary sketches, or work-in-progress depicted, as well as a brief comment from the artist, giving the whole thing an engaging scrapbook quality. There are also tributes from Anderson, Cherryh, Moorcock, McCaffrey, Foster, and Page; well deserved, needless to say.

For my money, Whelan is about the best artist in the field right now; and this is certainly the best art book of the year, despite some stiff competition.

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To go from the sublime to the academic, there are two recent reference works just in; both, I think, of enough general interest to warrant talking about here. The first is *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia,* edited by Peter Nichols and with a long list of contributors, the best known of which are Brian W. Aldiss, Thomas M. Disch, and Brian Stableford.

Now in reviewing anything so complex as an encyclopedia, I feel that reading the whole thing is above and beyond the call of duty, and only necessary for that kind of critic who wishes to display his own erudition by picking as many nits as possible. But from reading the front matter and spot checks in the contents, this *Encyclopedia* seems admirably thought out and carried through; entries cover not only authors and books, but films, magazines, and themes (a very tricky category to handle), among other matters. Also, given the curious form of several other "science fiction encyclopedias" we have seen lately, this one actually starts at A and goes through Z, a revolutionary concept. It looks like a most valuable tool.

I'm not so sure about that in the case of the other reference work, but this may be because I'm simply not the academic type. The *Survey of Science Fiction Literature* is a massive, five-volume affair devoted to "five hundred 2,000-word essay reviews of world-famous SF novels," including nine novels by Dick (!), eight by Heinlein, six by Clarke, and a large number of works from the past or translated from other languages that are unfamiliar to me, world famous or not. I like the fact that they have included commentaries on works by Merritt and Lovecraft, but am a bit baffled by the inclusion of an essay on Hodgson's *Deep Waters* and not one on his monumental *The Night Land.*

As for the essay reviews themselves, I guess you'll like them if they're the sort of thing you like. This *Survey* may well be a milestone for the inhabitants of the Groves of Academe; others may find it ponderous going even as a reference work, which is just as well, considering the whopping price.

—Baird Searles

ON ONE MORE BOOK

A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction is a useful volume for the beginner, just the sort of thing you want to include with the second or third batch of science fiction books you give to a prospective convert. It won't tell the experienced reader much he doesn't already

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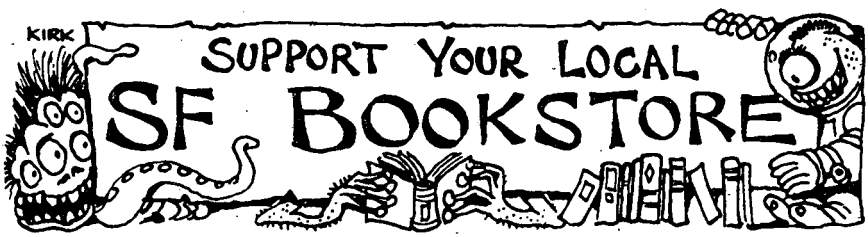
know, but for someone who is just starting to feel his way around, the summaries of the work of two or so hundred authors may be very revealing, particularly since referents are provided: "If you like Leinster's work, you might want to move on to that of John Campbell and Alan Nourse." Most of the information is accurate, save for occasional slips like the claim that Daniel Keyes wrote nothing but "Flowers for Algernon." The authors do their best to be unbiased, and represent a wide range of tastes. Also included are listings of various series books and a short history of the field from Mary Shelley on.

—Darrell Schweitzer



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THE GOD AND HIS MAN

by Gene Wolfe

art: George Barr

Mr. Wolfe, who has won the Nebula Award, the Chicago Foundation for Literature Award, and the Rhysling Award for science fiction poetry, is considered to be one of the finest craftspeople working in science fiction today. Herewith, a look at myth, and culture, and history–that is still very much SF.

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Once long, long ago, when the Universe was old, the mighty and powerful god Isid Iooo IoooE, whose name is given by certain others in other ways, and who is determined in every place and time to do what is good, came to the world of Zed. As every man knows, such gods travel in craft that can never be wrecked–and indeed, how could they be wrecked, when the gods are ever awake and hold the tiller? He came, I say, to the world of Zed, but he landed not and made no port, for it is not fit (as those who made the gods long ago ruled) that a god should set his foot upon any world, however blue, however fair.

Therefore Isid Iooo IoooE remained above the heavens, and his craft, though it travelled faster than the wind, contrived to do so in such a way that it stood suspended–as the many-hued stars themselves do not–above that isle of Zed that is called by the men of Zed (for they are men, or nearly) Land. Then the god looked down upon Zed, and seeing that the men of Zed were men and the women thereof women, he summoned to him a certain man of Urth. The summons of Isid Iooo IoooE cannot be disobeyed.

"Man," said the god, "go down to the world of Zed. For behold, the men of Zed are even as you are, and their women are women." Then he let Man see through his own eyes, and Man saw the men of Zed, how they herded their cattle and drove their plows and beat the little drums of Zed. And he saw the women of Zed, and how many were fair to look upon, and how they lived in sorrow and idleness, or else in toil and weariness, even like the women of Urth.

He said to the god, "If I am ever to see my own home, and my own women, and my children again, I must do as you say. But if I go as I am, I shall not see any of those things ever again. For the men of Zed are men–you yourself have said it–and therefore crueler than any beast."

"It is that cruelty we must end," said the god. "And in order that you may assist me with your reports, I have certain gifts for you." Then he gave Man the enchanted cloak Tarnung by which none should see him when he did not wish to be seen, and he gave Man the enchanted sword Maser, whose blade is as long as the wielder wishes it (though it weighs nothing) and against which not even stone can stand.

No sooner had Man tied Tarnung about his shoulders and picked up Maser than the god vanished from his sight, and he found he rested in a grove of trees with scarlet flowers.

The time of the gods is not as the time of men and women. Who can say how long Man wandered across Land on Zed? He wandered

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in the high, hot lands where men have few laws and many slaves.

There he fought many fights until he knew all the manner of fighting of the people of the high, hot lands and grew shamed of killing those men with Maser, and took for himself the crooked sword of those lands, putting Maser by. Then he drew to him a hundred wild men, bandits, and slaves who had slain their masters and fled, and murderers of many kinds. And he armed them after the manner of the high, hot lands, and mounted them on the yellow camels of those lands, that oftimes crush men with their necks, and led them in many wars. His face was like the faces of other men, and his sword like their swords; he stood no taller than they, and his shoulders were no broader; yet because he was very cunning and sometimes vanished from the camp, his followers venerated him.

At last he grew rich, and built a citadel in the fastness of the mountains. It stood upon a cliff and was rimmed with mighty walls. A thousand spears and a thousand spells guarded it. Within were white domes and white towers, a hundred fountains, and gardens that leaped up the mountain in roses and ran down it like children in the laughter of many waters. There Man sat at his ease and exchanged tales with his captains of their many wars. There he listened to the feet of his dancers, which were as the pattering of rain, and meditated on their round limbs and smiling faces. And at last he grew tired of these things, and wrapping himself in Tarnung vanished, and was seen in that citadel no more.

Then he wandered in the steaming lands, where the trees grew taller than his towers, and the men are shy and kill from the shadows with little poisoned arrows no longer than their forearms. There for a long while he wore the cloak Tarnung always, for no sword avails against such an arrow in the neck. The weight of the sword he had fetched from the high, hot lands oppressed him there, and the breath of the steaming lands rusted its blade; and so he cast it, one day, into a slow river where the black crocodiles swam and the river-horses with amber eyes floated like logs or bellowed like thunder. But the magical sword Maser he kept.

And in the steaming lands he learned the ways of the great trees, of which each is an island, with its own dwellers thereon; and he learned the ways of the beasts of Zed, whose cleverness is so much less than the cleverness of men, and whose wisdom is so much more. There he tamed a panther with eyes like three emeralds, so that it followed him like a dog and killed for him like a hawk; and when he came upon a village of the men of the steaming lands, he leaped from a high branch onto the head of their idol and smote the hut

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of their chief with the sword Maser and vanished from their sight. And when he returned after a year to that village, he saw that the old idol was destroyed, and a new idol set up, with lightning in its hand and a panther at its feet.

Then he entered that village and blessed all the people and made the lap of that idol his throne. He rode an elephant with a blood-red tusk and two trunks; his war-canoes walked up and down the river on a hundred legs; the heads of his drums were beaten with the white bones of chiefs; his wives were kept from the sun so their pale beauty would lure him to his hut by night and their fresh skins give him rest even in the steaming lands, and they were gorged with oil and meal until he lay upon them as upon pillows of silk. And so he would have remained had not the god Isid Iooo IoooE come to him in a dream of the night and commanded him to bestir himself, wandering and observing in the cold lands.

There he walked down a thousand muddy roads and kissed cool lips in a hundred rainy gardens. The people of the cold lands keep no slaves and have many laws, and their justice is the wonder of strangers; and so he found the bread of the cold lands hard and scant, and for a long time he cleaned boots for it, and for a long time dug ditches to drain their fields.

And each day the ship of Isid Iooo IoooE circled Zed, and when it had made several hundred such circles, Zed circled its lonely sun, and circled again, and yet again, so that Man's beard grew white, and the cunning that had won battles in the high, hot lands and burned the idol in the steaming lands was replaced with something better and less useful.

One day he plunged the blade of his shovel into the earth and turned his back to it. In a spinney he drew out Maser (which he had not drawn for so long that he feared its magic was no more than a dream he had had when young) and cut a sapling. With that for a staff he took to the roads again, and when its leaves withered–which they did but slowly in that wet, cold country–he cut another and another, so that he taught always beneath a green tree.

In the marketplace he told of honor, and how it is a higher law than any law.

At the crossroads he talked of freedom, the freedom of the wind and clouds, the freedom that loves all things and is without guilt.

Beside city gates he told stories of the forgotten cities that were and of the forgotten cities that might be, if only men would forget them.

Often the people of the cold lands sought to imprison him accord-

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ing to their laws, but he vanished from their sight. Often they mocked him, but he smiled at their mockery, which knew no law. Many among the youth of the cold lands heard him, and many feigned to follow his teachings, and a few did follow them and lived strange lives.

Then a night came when the first flakes of snow were falling; and on that night the god Isid Iooo IoooE drew him up as the puppeteer lifts his doll. A few friends were in the lea of a wood with him, and it seemed to them that there came a sudden flurry of snow spangled with colors, and Man was gone.

But it seemed to him, as he stood once more in the presence of the god Isid Iooo IoooE, that he had waked from a long dream; his hands had their strength again, his beard was black, and his eyes had regained their clarity, though not their cunning.

"Now tell me," Isid Iooo IoooE commanded him, "all that you have seen and done," and when Man had told him, he asked, "Which of these three peoples loved you the best, and why did you love them?"

Man thought for a time, drawing the cloak Tarnung about his shoulders, for it seemed to him cold in the belly of the ship of Isid Iooo IoooE. "The people of the high, hot lands are unjust," he said. "Yet I came to love them, for there is no falsity in them. They feast their friends and flay their foes, and trusting no one, never weep that they are betrayed.

"The people of the cold lands are just, and yet I came to love them also, though that was much harder.

"The people of the steaming lands are innocent of justice and injustice alike. They follow their hearts, and while I dwelt among them I followed mine and loved them best of all."

"You yet have much to learn, Man," said the god Isid Iooo IoooE. "For the people of the cold lands are much the nearest to me. Do you not understand that in time the steaming lands, and all of the Land of Zed, must fall to one of its great peoples or the other?"

Then while Man watched through his eyes, certain good men in the cold lands died, which men called lightning. Certain evil men died also, and men spoke of disease. Dreams came to women and fancies to children; rain and wind and sun were no longer what they had been; and when the children were grown, the people of the cold lands went down into the steaming lands and built houses there, and taking no slaves drove the people of the steaming lands behind certain fences and walls, where they sat in the dust until they died.

"In the high, hot lands," commented Man, "the people of the steaming lands would have suffered much. Many of them I had,

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toiling under the whip to build my walls. Yet they sang when they could, and ran when they could, and stole my food when they could not. And some of them grew fat on it."

And the god Isid Iooo IoooE answered, "It is better that a man should die than that he should be a slave."

"Even so," Man replied, "you yourself have said it." And drawing Maser he smote the god, and Isid Iooo IoooE perished in smoke and blue fire.

Whether Man perished also, who can say? It is long since Man was seen in the Land of Zed, but then he was ever wont to vanish when the mood took him. Of the lost citadel in the mountains, overgrown with roses, who shall say who guards it? Of the little poisoned arrows, slaying in the twilight, who shall say who sends them? Of the rain-washed roads, wandering among forgotten towns, who shall say whose tracks are there?

But it may be that all these things now are passed, for they are things of long ago, when the Universe was old and there were more gods.

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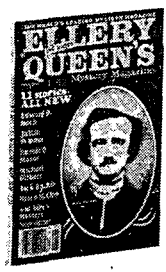

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PROFESSOR CRACKER'S ANTITELEPHONE
by Martin Gardner

After the explosion of Charles Blabbage's prediction machine (see this magazine for August 1979), his assistant, Ada Loveface, went to work for Alexander Graham Cracker, a famous astrophysicist at Barkback College in London.

Professor Cracker's project was to design a machine that could, at least in theory, send signals through interstellar space at speeds faster than light. Back in the twentieth century, physicist Gerald Feinberg and others had found that relativity theory permits the existence of particles that always go faster than light. Feinberg called them "tachyons" after a Greek word for "swift."

Just as ordinary particles ("tardyons") can never be accelerated to the speed of light, so tachyons can never be slowed down to the speed of light. Since tachyons are always moving, they have no rest mass. This allowed Feinberg to represent their rest masses by imaginary numbers. After six months of intensive research, Professor Cracker finally designed what he called a "tachyonic antitelephone." Although tachyons had not yet been proved to exist, *if* they existed Cracker's antitelephone could modulate a beam of tachyons in such a way that signals could be carried by the beam.

"Because tachyons move faster than light," said Dr. Loveface, "doesn't that mean they travel backward in time?"

"Of course," replied Professor Cracker. "Einstein's equations guarantee it. That's what's so marvelous about my antitelephone. We can send a message to intelligent aliens in the Andromeda Galaxy at such a speed that it gets there several days before we send it!"

"In that case," said Dr. Loveface, "your antitelephone won't work."

Dr. Loveface then outlined a logical proof of her statement that was so ironclad that Professor Cracker abandoned his project at once. What sort of proof did she give? See page 101 for the answer.

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THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR
by Erwin S. Strauss

SF con(vention) activity is about to start picking up, so it's not too early to start planning for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an addressed, stamped envelope at 9850 Fairfax Square #232, Fairfax VA 22031. For the latest news, the Hot Line is (703) 273-6111. If a machine answers, leave your number CLEARLY and I'll call back. When writing cons, enclose an addressed, stamped envelope. I'm planning to be at many Eastern cons as Filthy Pierre. Look for me.

ConFusion. For info, write: **c/o Persello, 1115 Granger, Ann Arbor MI 48104.** Or phone: **(313) 971-3705** (10 AM to 10 PM only, not collect). Con will be held in: Plymouth MI (if location omitted, same as in address) on: 18-20 Jan., 1980. Guests will include: Stanley Schmidt, Eliot Shorter. Masquerade and (weather permitting) a snowcreature contest.

FortCon, c/o Anti-Martian Society, Box 407, Student Center, Colo. St. U., Ft. Collins CO 48104. 8-10 Feb. Fred (Berserker) Saberhagen, Ed Bryant, Bob Aluis. Second annual.

Rain, Box 48478, Vancouver BC V7X 1A2. 15-17 Feb. John Varley, Anet McOnel. "SF Weekend."

BoskLone, c/o NESFA, Box G, MIT PO, Boston MA 02139. (617) 926-3909. Danvers MA, 15-17 Feb. Spider & Jeanne Robinson. A down-sized Boskone, while NESFA people brace for NorEasCon.

DunDraCon, 386 Alcatraz, Oakland CA 94618. San Mateo CA, 16-18 Feb. SF/role-play game con.

PenultiCon, 4430 W. 36th Ave., Denver CO 80212. (303) 433-9774. 22-24 Feb. Vonda McIntyre, Hal Clement, Marty Massoglia, Ed Bryant. From the folks who'll bring you Denvention II.

HoosierCon, c/o Parrotte, Box 354, Mishawaka IN 46544. (219) 232-1685. South Bend IN, 29 Feb.-2 March. Robert (Another Fine Myth) Asprin, Juanita and Robert (Buck) Coulson.

WisCon, c/o SF3, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-0326. 7-9 March. Octavia Butler, Joan Vinge, David Hartwell, and Bev DeWeese. The leading feminist-oriented SF convention.

HalCon,, Box 3174 South, Halifax NS B3J 3H5. 7-9 March. A. E. (Slan) Van Vogt, Alfred (Demolished Man) Bester, Spider & Jeanne Robinson. At scenic St. Mary's University.

CoastCon, Box 6025, Biloxi MS 39532. (601) 392-4176. 14-16 March (not in hurricane season).

MonCon, Mountainlair SOW, WV U., Morgantown WV 26505. (504) 283-4833. 14-16 March.

MidWesterCon, c/o Russell, 50 Capri Dr., Florissant MO 63033. (314) 921-5527. Hazelwood (near St. Louis) MO, 14-16 March. Phyllis Eisenstein. Promoted by local school district.

LunaCon, Box 204, Brooklyn NY 11230. (212) 252-9759. Hasbrouck Heights NJ, 14-16 March. Larry Niven, Vincent DiFate, Nobel laureate Dr. Rosalyn S. Yalow. Near New York City.

WesterCon, Box 2009, Van Nuys CA 91404. Los Angeles CA, 4-6 July. Roger Zelazny, Bob Vardeman, Frank Denton. The granddaddy of Western cons. A good warmup for NorEasCon II.

NorEasCon II, Box 46, MIT PO, Boston MA 02139. 29 Aug.-1 Sept., 1980. Knight, Wilhelm, and Pelz. The 1980 WorldCon. Go to a few smaller cons first to prepare yourself for this.

Denvention II, Box 11545, Denver CO 80211. 2-7 Sept., 1981. C. L. Moore, Clifford Simak, R. Hevelin, Ed Bryant. The 1981 WorldCon. It's not too early to start planning vacations.

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MASCOT

by T. W. O'Brien

art: George Barr

The writer, a graduate of the University of Chicago, lives currently in Louisville, Kentucky, where he works with emotionally disturbed children while his wife attends medical school. This is his first sale.

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My name is Tom Griffin. That may not seem like such a hilarious thing for me to say, yet around the firehouse all I've had to do is answer the phone with my usual, "Engine Company Ten, Griffin here," to start people giggling. My name's been the source of seemingly inexhaustible mirth, at least for a few weeks. I'm not the butt of the jokes anymore, but I'll tell you later how that came about.

It all started the night the boiler in Benson's Department Store exploded. Despite the store's automatic sprinkler system it was quite a fire, a five-alarm blaze. We were the second-alarm engine company so we were there for almost the whole time. Only the final wash-down was left to do when we received the order to take up our hose.

It had been a busy night, with a restaurant grease fire soon after we came on duty at 6 P.M., then three false alarms, and finally the call on the Benson fire. When we finally returned to the firehouse around 4A.M. we were all bone-tired from humping stiff hoses up flights of stairs and battling the backpressure of water at 50 pounds per square inch. And we still had five hours of duty.

Now, I'm not telling you all this to make excuses for what we saw. I mean, it was still there days later when we were all well rested. But I think the way we all accepted the whole thing is much more understandable if you know just how burned out (if you'll pardon the expression) we were.

Bill Stachski had stayed behind on housewatch while we were gone. He says that he closed the big doors as soon as we were out with the trucks, and that he has no idea how the thing got inside. Trying to figure out how it did get in was a favorite diversion between fires that whole next week.

However it got in, it was there when we got back from the Benson's fire. Bob was the first one to notice it sitting back in the corner of the apparatus floor.

"Hey, Bill," he said, "where did you get this crazy stuffed animal?" It hadn't been there when we left, so Bob naturally assumed that Bill had put it there. We all watched as Bob walked towards it, unclipping his coat rings as he went.

Bob stopped short when the thing looked him in the eye and he realized that it wasn't stuffed at all, except maybe with flesh and organs like the rest of us.

I am the senior man of our company and chauffeur of our truck. Your life could be in my hands someday. So take my word for it; this thing was really there.

It stood about eighteen inches high at the shoulder and had a thirty-six inch wingspan. The body was like a cat's: four legs, fur,

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claws, and a long tail. But instead of a cat's head it had the head of a bird, with a sharp beak like a hawk or eagle. And wings. Fine, strong wings, nicely proportioned to the body.

But anyway, there stood Bob, open-mouthed, eye to eye with something out of a fairytale. The rest of us ran over to get a closer look. We stood around it, some with rubber coats and helmets still on. (I had my coat, helmet, and one boot off already. Being the veteran of the group I can get out of my firefighting gear faster than anyone.) Someone, I was too busy looking at that animal to notice who, asked for all of us: "What is it?"

Someone else said, "It looks like a Sphinx."

Gordon, our rookie who thinks he knows everything because he saw the world in the Air Force, disagreed, "Nah. The Sphinx has a man's head, not a bird's. I saw it when I was in Egypt."

I was standing closer than anyone to the thing. I still say that that was the reason it got up and walked to me first. It wasn't a case of "birds of a feather," as some maintain. Whatever the reason, over it came.

I froze for a minute. There was no way to know just what the beast might do. With that beak and those claws it could have done a lot of damage. But all it did was rub its head up against my leg, the one without the boot on it. This struck me as a very catlike thing to do, but I've never been around hawks and eagles very much. Maybe a falconer has feathered heads rubbed against him like that too. And what the heck, it seemed to be a friendly gesture.

So there didn't seem to be anything else for me to do but bend over and pet the thing. And that seemed to break the spell. Everyone gathered around to touch the creature to see if it was real. We were especially fascinated by the way the feathers on the head and wings blended into the fur of the body. Furry feathers became feathery fur, and it was so gradual that you could not tell where one ended and the other began.

We stood around arguing sphinxes and unicorns and things that go bump in the night. We disputed mutations, tissue grafts, pets of von Däniken's Olympians, and time warps from ancient Greece. But we were all so exhausted that not even a mythical beast could keep us going for long. So we headed for the bunkroom to try to get some sleep. Bob volunteered to take housewatch for the rest of the night, said he would not be able to sleep after the shock he had gotten looking into that thing's eyes. The thing itself curled up in a corner of the firehouse kitchen, folding its wings and putting its head on its paws to go to sleep.

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We managed to get a couple hours' sleep without any alarms coming in. Somehow waking up and finding the thing still there, we all kind of accepted it. The day shift thought it was some kind of hoax that we had worked up, but they finally accepted it too. We even adopted the beast as the firehouse mascot.

Since we'd gone that far, I figured we ought to find out just exactly what the thing *was*. So I went to the public library. The librarian found a bestiary with lots of pictures in it. The book was intended for an eight-year-old, but it did give me the names of various mythcal beasts. Once I had the names I did some research in the encyclopedia and in some books on mythology. And I found our little friend. As I explained to the boys back at the firehouse, Gordon had been only part right.

"*The* Sphinx, the one in Egypt, has a man's head, but sphinxes were at various times portrayed with the head of a man, a ram, or a hawk," I told them.

"So it's a sphinx then?" Bob asked.

"Well," I answered, "there is another mythical beast that's always shown with a lion's body and the head and wings of an eagle."

"What's that?"

"A gryphon."

That's when the laughter started. Those who had a little more control of their breathing got out comments like, "One of the family, Tom?" and "No wonder he likes you."

Well, look, how would you deal with a mythical beast? Men whose lives depend on each other can say anything to each other, and do. Humor helps you deal with the fact that you will not always be in time to save a life, and that any one of you may not come back from the next run. It seems to work, and knowing that makes being the butt of the jokes a little easier to take.

I needed *some* kind of consolation because–well, you can imagine. The wisecracks tapered off after awhile, and of course it's Bob's turn to catch it now; but back then everyone was trying to outdo everyone else with jokes about Griffin and his Gryphon.

Somebody got a food bowl for our mascot with "Griffin" written on the side. That one made me mad. It was not that I minded having my name associated with our mascot. In fact, I think it was an honor to have the same name as the finest, noblest animal I have ever known. And I know that different books spell it G-R-I-F-F-I-N or G-R-Y-P-H-O-N or G-R-I-F-F-O-N. It was just that any phone book thicker than an inch has at least a dozen Griffins. It was too mon a name for such a fine and unusual beast. Griffin was a forty-

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eight-year-old fireman who was never ambitious enough to study for the lieutenant's test. Gryphon suited our mascot better.

I think I mentioned Gryph's food bowl. What to feed him was a puzzle at first. (After a long discussion we decided that Gryph was a "he," although he lacked any conclusive external evidence one way or the other.) None of the mythology books that I had taken out of the library ever mentioned what mythical beasts were supposed to eat. Except, of course, when they tore some hapless mythological hero limb from limb and devoured the pieces. None of us were willing to go that far.

Someone suggested giving him some milk. But I pointed out that while Gryph was half cat, it wasn't the half that cats normally use to lap up milk. We finally decided that with that sharp beak and claws Gryph's diet had to include a lot of meat. So we gave him some dog food that we had around the firehouse. It was left over from our last mascot, a nice, traditional Dalmatian. The dog food seemed to suit him just fine. We also fed him cat food, left-over steak, raw hamburger, and other table scraps. He caught mice on his own and one night he got outside and got himself a rabbit.

His going out bothered me. No one knew about Gryph except for those of us at the firehouse. I mean, it was not the kind of thing you put in your weekly report downtown, or tell your wife when you get home from work. I mean, that starts people smelling your breath and watching you out of the corner of their eye.

I was really worried about what might happen to Gryph if he went outside and someone saw him. They might shoot him, or try to put him in a zoo or something. So I sat down with Gryph to talk. He still seems to like me best of all the guys here. Maybe there *is* some kind of magic in names. Anyway, I told Gryph why I was concerned about him leaving the firehouse. He looked at me with those eagle eyes of his and seemed to understand. At least, he didn't go out again after that, except on very dark nights to stretch his wings for a little while. He would fly around inside the station house too, but sometimes he needed to really let go and he had to have plenty of room for that.

I wish just once I could have seen him fly in the sunlight. He had the kind of grace and class you sometimes see in a thoroughbred horse, or the kind you *know* a big cat in the zoo would have if he were in the jungle where he belongs.

One thing that showed his class was the fact that Gryph did not quite look like any of the pictures in the mythology books. Those pictures all looked like they were pasted together. Somebody took

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a lion, chopped off its head, and stuck an eagle's head and wings on the body. Gryph was an animal with a beak and wings and four legs and a tail. But while they may have reminded you of an eagle's head and a cat's body, they were not. They were a gryphon's head and wings and body and legs. They all belonged.

There was another difference between Gryph and the gryphons in the books; his size. Gryphons were always described as big, half lion and half eagle. Gryph was more like a mix of a bobcat and a sparrow hawk. There were different opinions on why Gryph was so small. I think that the old mythmakers just exaggerated things a little. Others thought Gryph must be some other animal related to a gryphon, like a house cat is to a lion. Some thought he was a baby gryphon. The last group lived in mortal fear of little Gryph's mother showing up.

But Gryph's mother has not shown up yet. Gryph seems content to stay here with us in the firehouse and we are happy to have him here. We have fixed up a little bed for him in the firehouse kitchen, and he has learned to stay out of sight when anyone except the firemen are around. All in all he has turned out to be a very good mascot.

I don't even have to put up with all the jokes now. Bob has all that now, just because he happened to grow up in Phoenix, Arizona. Actually, I would almost rather go back to being the butt of the jokes rather than hear one more parody of that old Glen Campbell song.

You see, someone called in a fire last night. It was a small but fierce rubbish fire in a vacant lot. No one in the neighborhood could recall anything being there that would burn like that. Whatever it had been, it was just a pile of smoldering ashes by the time we got there, so all we did was give it a heavy bath as a precaution. We had soaked it pretty well when suddenly this huge bird rose up out of the ashes, sopping wet and hopping mad.

We're still trying to decide what to feed it.

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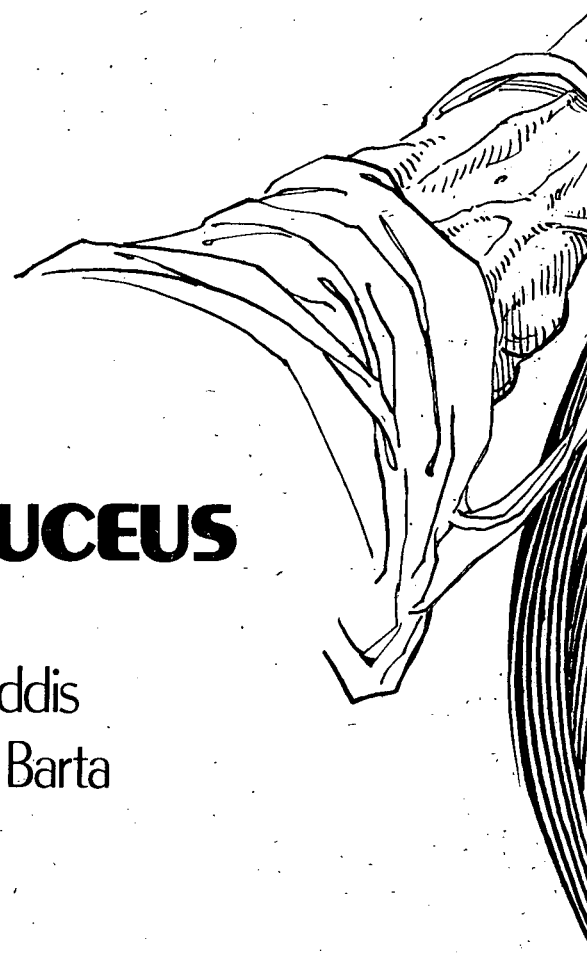

Caduceus

by C.R. Faddis
art: Hilary Barta

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The author was born in 1948, in Pittsburgh, PA. Her degree is in history, from Carnegie-Mellon University; she's now a research writer and editor at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education at Ohio State University. She is the author of two "Star Trek" short stories that appeared in Bantam's New Voyages 2, *and she has been active in Star Trek fandom. Ms. Faddis collects cacti, loves deserts, and is owned by a black cat named Arnold.*

The mummy was in an excellent state of preservation. Even the soft neural tissue beneath the arachnoid's anterior exoskeleton was intact. Eighteen centuries had taken a toll of most of the corpses in the catacombs, despite the permafrost of Alcestis's upper strata.

Doctor Calvin was ecstatic. A preliminary scan showed that the mummy was not shot through with the usual tumors of plague; perhaps the creature had survived the plague. Maybe it had died of natural causes, later. It was a lead. After five years of scattergun research and hunch-driven theorizing, it was the first *real* lead. Calvin wasted no time suiting up in the anticontamination gear and entering the sealed dissection cubicle. This cadaver demanded his direct attention, no manipulation by remotes.

An hour vanished as he charted the major organs, making verbal and visual notes for the overhead recorders. The arachnoid was almost certainly an ancestor of the nomadic Keeris—another datum to back Calvin's hypothesis. Humming happily, the doctor prepared cultures of every tissue and began a comp-analysis on the traces of frozen circulatory fluid. It wasn't until he plunged a specimen of cardiac tissue into the cryovat that he noticed—violently—that one of his gloves had a puncture.

"Damnation!" He dropped the specimen and stormed to the decontamination booth, sealing the door behind him. Stripping, he stuffed his garments into the disintegrator and, with another curse, kicked it shut. The booth's cleansing beams came on and scrubbed and bombarded him with antiseptics. For safety, he ran through the process a second time. Then, yanking on a sterile lab coat, he stepped through the outside seal into the control room once more.

The recording system shut down at a snap of the switch. Calvin glanced at the monitors gloomily. He programmed the remotes to

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return the mummy to the airtight preservation pod in which he'd brought it to the lab. The mummy itself was still of archaeological value, but the flaw in his glove had done double damage: when the evidence had contaminated him, he had also contaminated it. The cadaver, the cultures, all the medical data were compromised by the zoo of bacteria and viruses that are the barnacles of human existence.

The mummy was safely sealed away. Running his hands through his thinning hair, Calvin shut down the monitors. Then, releasing the safety cover, he pulled the lever on the sterilization unit. Inside the dissection chamber, unseen by human eyes, a terrible blaze of white light vaporized every organic particle—specimens, culture medium, microorganisms. The throat of an erupting volcano could not have been more sterile.

In need of a cup of coffee, Calvin left for the canteen that was the heart of Clifftown Station. The alien infection he'd absorbed was already on its way through his bloodstream.

Thin snow dusted the upland deserts of the planet Alcestis, splashed into the north-facing crevices by the persistent winds. Doctor Darwin MacNeil leaned forward in the copilot's seat and peered through the transhipʼs windows, drinking in the view below. It suggested a skin-cracking dryness; the patches of snow were incongruous.

Andre Iyevka, the transhipʼs pilot, pointed eastward. "There it is," he said. "Clifftown Station."

Bright vermillion surveyors' domes perched on the rim of a distant mesa, their color an intrusion in the pervasive pastels. Iyevka banked the craft for an approach.

"Clifftown Station to supply transhipʼ," the radio crackled. "We have you on visual."

"This is the *Casper* ackowledging," Iyevka said. "ETA in four minutes. Stand by with those anchors, it's breezy around here."

"Standing by, *Casper*."

"Brrrr." MacNeil swiveled in the seat as his assistant, Caroline Sommerville, entered the cockpit, her arms wrapped around herself. "If we have to go out in that, I'm breaking out the thermals," she said.

"*Da,* you'd better," the pilot grinned. "Siberia is a resort compared to this."

"Cheer up, kid." MacNeil rose and clapped the pilot on the back. "After four months, those surveyors will be so happy to see new

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faces that you'll never get a chance to notice the weather."

"Happy to see *me*," Iyevka called after him. "Don't be too sure about yourself."

Shrugging, MacNeil waved Caroline ahead of him to the storage stow aft and helped her locate the thermals among the jam of medical supplies.

"Is all of this for Clifftown Station?" she said.

MacNeil picked up the inventory slate, ran his eyes down it. "Whoever this J.D.C. is, he or she's been putting in orders like this all year. This latest one is extra heavy on antibiotics." He didn't like the implications. "Either Clifftown Station is peopled by the most accident-prone drillers in the galaxy, or someone's black-marketing the stuff."

"Or they have a legitimate medical problem." Caroline paused in shaking out the thermals and her handsome face tilted up to meet MacNeil's. "Surveyors have a way of 'forgetting' their immunity boosters."

"Don't remind me." MacNeil scanned the slate again. "Well, I don't see anything out of the ordinary in the reports. Whatever is going on, our little surprise visit should shake it out into the open. Two will get you ten, it's nothing worse than a nice embarrassing round of Anthasian clap."

"Doctor, really!"

Grinning, MacNeil thrust a leg into a thermal jumpsuit.

Iyevka set the *Casper* down near the waiting ground crew and killed the power as the craft was anchored to bedrock. Even so, it shuddered in the wind.

Suited up, they stepped into a bitter squall. The forty meters to the nearest prefab dome were ice-stinging, hang-onto-the-guide-ropes-for-dear-life minutes that left everybody shivering, lips numbed and eyes and noses streaming. MacNeil let himself be led to a bench, seeing the inside of the hut through tear-blurred eyes. The howl of the wind died as doors whined shut, and a blast of heated air drove out the cold.

Someone began helping MacNeil out of his thermals, and he dragged a freed arm across his eyes. What he saw chilled him more than the squall had. His helper, a tarnished-brown young man, was marred with dry white blisters. The other surveyors in the hut were similarly marked, yet their movements were vigorous and their color under the blisters was good.

Climbing out of his suit's leggings, MacNeil unpacked his medical remote and passed it over the nearest man, frowning at the ambig-

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uous readings.

"We weren't expecting anyone but a pilot," the man smiled, "but we're always glad to have visitors." He offered a hand. "I'm Telerio Takanna, drilling engineer."

MacNeil drew back from the proffered hand. "Caroline, Andre—don't touch anyone. Andre, the anticontamination suits are in the blue pack. Break out three of them and get into one."

"What for?" Iyevka said.

"Do it *now*." MacNeil peered at Takanna's face, examining the lesions more closely without touching them. "I'm Doctor MacNeil from Company Central. How long have you had these blemishes?"

"Oh, this?" Shrugging, Takanna folded MacNeil's thermals. "It's just a rash, everyone's got it. Just some little bug."

"We'll see about that. Where's your team medic?"

"I'll take you below to the infirmary and let Doc Calvin fill you in," Takanna said.

"Calvin?" Something snagged at MacNeil's memory, but then Iyevka handed him an anticontamination suit.

Takanna tore his eyes from watching Caroline Sommerville pull the clear, skin-like suit on over her exquisite legs. "Ah, did you say something, Doc?"

The light, anticontamination hood settled over MacNeil's shoulders, and he closed the seals and started the rebreather. "Let's go below," he said. "Someone has a lot of explaining to do."

A steeply sloped tunnel cut neatly into the heart of the mesa. The soft intermittent lighting revealed rich textures on the surfaces, sculpted reliefs crazed like porcelain by the stress of fluctuating temperatures. The abstract carvings spiraled down the passage, linked together as though narrating a myth or prayer of some bygone hero or deity.

"Watch your step," Takanna warned. "I trip over myself every time I come through here."

"Is this a kind of writing?" Iyevka asked.

"Nothing anyone can deciper. It's pretty, isn't it? Makes you sorry the race died out."

The tunnel became damp as they penetrated the permafrost layer. A form of fungus or algae grew over the carvings, tinting the beige stone with bright patches of orange and pink wherever the surveyors had mounted lights that warmed the stone.

"Why are you living down here instead of in the prefabs?" MacNeil asked the Freyan chemist beside him.

Yed-Paolor's heteroplastic head, offset on the alien's shoulder and

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grafted to the left clavicle, turned to converse while her natural head watched the passage ahead. "We have determined that it is—how do you humans say?—more 'comfortable' in the grottoes, and more spacious. You may have noticed as your transhipp approached that there are no surface remains of the civilization that flourished here. The beings did not disturb the surface environment; they built beneath it."

"I've heard about that," Iyevka said. "Is that why Alcestis is nicknamed 'Catacombs'?"

"It's probably some explorer's morbid idea of a joke," MacNeil snapped.

"Not so," the Freyan replied. "It is a most appropriate epithet."

Leading the group into a brighter side passage, Takanna added, "Most of this part of Alcestis is one big graveyard, and this particular mesa seems to have been the main 'chapel'." He waved at the walls. "There're tombs behind most of the passages."

"*Tombs*?" Iyevka gulped. The young pilot shook his head and walked closer—much closer—to the others. But then the tunnel ended in a fitted doorway scavenged from one of the huts.

Beyond it, the living quarters were a series of dry chambers strung together by passages, an elaborate macrame executed in stone. The spaces were pleasing even to human senses, but MacNeil gave them scant attention. He scrutinized every person they passed, mentally ticking off any visible signs of illness. Discounting the few nonhumans, he noted a variety on different people. But the one consistent symptom was the white blistering that marred faces, hands, and arms. He was still grinding through mental texts when Takanna knocked at a door marked **TEMP INFIRM** in yellow engineer's chalk.

Inside, a clutch of cots held several patients in the immense, echoing room. Off to one side, an iron-haired man in a rumpled lab coat sat with his back to the door, examining one of the patients.

Takanna harrumphed, then spoke up. "Hey, Doc? We have visitors."

The man turn slowly, blinked, then zeroed on MacNeil. "Darwin. I should have known. I'd heard you joined the Company. You always were a prize snoop."

MacNeil's mouth dropped open. Then his wit came to his rescue. "Hello, J.D. You haven't mellowed a microgram, have you?" he heard himself drawl. Moving to Calvin's patient, he inspected the dressings on the woman's arms. "Your practical skills haven't improved much, either."

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"Pill-pushing and sprain-splinting are your racket, not mine."

Waving Calvin out of the chair, MacNeil sat down to redo the bandages. Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched as the older man made awkward apologies to Sommerville and Iyevka. Jefferson Davis Calvin! The once-famous researcher had not aged gracefully. He looked a good bit older than the sixty or so years MacNeil knew he carried. The leftover babyfat Calvin had had while head of Exomedicine at MacNeil's alma mater had melted away to stooped gauntness, and the yellow-grey hair was overdue for a trim. How far the man's fortunes had fallen, to reduce him to a surveyors' medic—a post usually filled by doctors right out of an undistinguished internship. MacNeil's frown deepened, but he wiped it carefully from his face before turning to the others.

"I hate to break up the party, but I want to know what these people have contracted." He eyed Calvin, decided not to press immediately for why Calvin hadn't reported the situation. "Caroline, get a list of patients and personal statistics, and begin matching up symptoms for the data bank. Andre, as soon as the wind outside lets up, bring down the diagnostic computer and the other supplies. Calvin, we'll start by taking a look at your logbook."

Iyevka took care of transferring the medical equipment to the infirmary, then left the doctors to their work and made a tour of the station with Takanna. The mesa was a maze of tunnels, many of which were barren of decoration. Iyevka stepped up to one of the passage walls and inspected the stone. It was as smooth and glazed as if it had been melted out by a laserdrill.

"Not our work, Andre," Takanna said. "Doc Calvin knows a lot about archaeology, and he figures this place is over three thousand standard years old."

"The extinct native culture did this?"

"Who else?"

"Have—have you ever followed the tunnels to their end?"

"We've never found an 'end,' so to speak. Most of the tunnels take a sharp dip, too steep to walk, and they just keep going down."

Iyevka's sense of adventure was aroused. "Has anyone ever climbed down very far?"

"Mikki Fo tried, a few months ago, when the winds got too high to go out to the drilling sites. She hit a cross-passage about a thousand meters down, but when she explored it, there were only more tunnels. One of these days, if I ever get the time, I want to rig a power-lift so we can take a look in some of the really deep wells."

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Iyevka laughed, shaking his blond bangs out of his eyes under the close-fitting anticontamination hood. "We could set up the pulleys, you and I, when we both have a few free hours. Tomorrow, maybe?"

Ruefully, Takanna held up his hands. They were freshly bandaged. "I can't climb. But I'll run the motor for your line, if you're game to go down alone."

The grin widened on Iyevka's face as he punched Takanna on the arm. "Now tell me, who could turn down a challenge like that?"

The footsteps behind MacNeil clomped back and forth, pacing interminably. Every once in a while, Calvin would pause long enough to peer over MacNeil's shoulder at the computer readouts, then he'd resume his pacing.

"Sit down, will you?" MacNeil growled. "I can't concentrate with you jogging in place behind me."

Calvin ignored him.

Sighing, MacNeil pushed back from the console. "Except for these blasted lesions, it's one confounding symptom after another. I haven't the slightest idea of what we're dealing with."

"There's the sinus problem. Most of us had that the first day after the blisters appeared."

"Well, the computer's never heard of a combination like that, and neither have I. For all I can tell, we could have at least four completely unrelated infections going here at once."

Calvin finally picked a spot and stood still. "At least I've lived to hear the summa cum laude *wunderkind* admit he doesn't have all the answers."

A sarcastic comeback formed on MacNeil's lips, but he bit it back. There was no point in provoking Calvin. The old man was proud as Lucifer, and he'd already been caught with his pants down once this week. MacNeil looked up. "Look, J.D., it's been twenty years. Can't we shelve the war? The damage is done. There's work to do."

Calvin just stared at the reflections in a polished metal cabinet and scratched absently at the blisters on his hands. His mouth was a thin, sealed line.

Snapping off the computer, MacNeil turned his mind back to the problem at hand. "This isn't getting us anywhere; we may not get anything from the tissue cultures for weeks." He spun in the chair to face Calvin. "Maybe we can backtrack the infection. Tell me, who turned up with the first lesions?"

Calvin shifted uneasily. "I did."

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"You? Do you have any idea how you got them?"

Tearing himself from his contemplation of his reflection, Calvin gave a new set of instructions to the computer. The readout promptly displayed a holotape of an autopsy—an autopsy of a mummified alien, the species of which MacNeil recognized immediately.

"A Keeris—space gypsies?"

"No, not a modern Keeris," Calvin corrected. "An inhabitant of Alcestis, dead eighteen hundred and nine years, though I do think the gypsies' species originated here."

"What does this have to do with the infection?"

Calvin grimaced. "A flaw developed in one of my gloves while I was dissecting this cadaver. The lesions appeared the next day; but by then, I'd spread it by touch to some of the surveyors; and soon everyone had it. I didn't think it would affect humans seriously, and that antibiotics would knock it out, but—" He swallowed, gestured at the readout. "It's probably the same plague that destroyed the Keeris here."

"Plague? Wait a minute. What were you doing poking into the tombs here? I thought this planet—this whole system—is under archaeological interdict."

Folding his arms, Calvin locked eyes with him. "Archaeological interdict by my own recommendation, Darwin. There were three surveys here before. I was with two of them. Archaeopathology is my specialty, or have you forgotten everything I taught you?" In a more reasonable tone, he added, "There are archaeological and—I think—medical treasures here that must be protected from the insensitive. Do you know what the surveyors are finding here? Do you know why Company keeps sending them back to take another look around? They've found traces of high grade *oil*. Natural petroleum. Maybe by the carrier loads."

"Natural oil's pretty rare stuff, Calvin; what makes you think there's enough here to make profiteering worthwhile?"

"It isn't rare on certain classes of planets. Earth itself used to be swimming in it—used to burn it for *fuel* half a millennium ago. But the base molecules of Alcestin crude are the makings of jewelers' plastics, and worth—oh, it would take a financier to estimate the wealth."

"And what does oil have to do with opening tombs?" MacNeil insisted.

Calvin looked at him as though he were brain-damaged. "Why, the planet would be overrun. Miners, heavy equipment, large-scale operations—then looters and grave robbers—it would be horrible.

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There'd be no valid evidence of Keeris culture inside of a year."

"If you knew about all this, you should have notified the Company. And if you suspected a viable plague here, you should never have opened a single tomb!"

"I don't have to apologize for my decisions to you."

"Damn you, I think you do!" MacNeil yanked open the seal on the sleeve of his anticontamination suit and stuck his bare arm under Calvin's nose. Tiny white pustules were beginning to raise on his skin.

Calvin stared, horror slowly displacing his rage. Then he turned on his heel and was gone out the door.

The chamber set aside for the mess hall, called "the canteen," was also the station's social center; and aside from having to wear the slightly confining anticontamination suit, Caroline Sommerville felt as comfortable there as she felt at the Company's home base on Comstock II. She'd been teaching the more healthy of the surveyors basic nursing skills so there would be more help with the bedridden patients; and she and the Freyan woman, Yed-Paolor, became friends.

Playing cards with the Freyan was a startling experience, though. Paolor, the heteroplastic personality, would presumably be playing her hand when Yed would look over and make a suggestion about strategy. Watching two parts of a single being debate each other over a card game was disconcerting. On top of that, Yed felt no compunctions about discussing Paolor's hand in detail, so that Caroline could hardly help knowing every card her opponent held. It was a hopeless situation. Freyans simply did not understand the concept of secrecy, even on so limited a scale. Yed-Paolor left after several hands, with a deprecating but humorous opinion of human entertainments.

Caroline was due back at the infirmary in ten minutes. She was just leaving when Dr. Calvin came in, trailing a cloud of ill temper. She nodded to him as she passed him.

"Oh, Ms. Sommerville?"

She stopped. "Yes, Doctor, is there something I can do for you?" Polite. Noncommittal. The man was a mystery to her.

"I realize I was somewhat . . . curt . . . when we met yesterday. I've been meaning to apologize properly. If you're not in a hurry—if you have time—would you join me for a chat?"

She met his eyes, and his anger was gone, replaced by shy hopefulness. "I do have a few minutes," she said; and putting her first

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impression firmly aside, she joined him at a table.

"I'm afraid my—" he began.

"Is it true—" she said at the same instant.

They chuckled nervously, and Calvin waved her first.

"I asked Dr. MacNeil where he'd known you before. I hope you don't mind, but it was obvious, and I'm a curious person. He told me you were a Korbel Prize winner in medicine where he went to medical school," she said. "I'm interested because my husband was Paul Sommerville, another Korbel winner—maybe you've heard of him? I was hoping you might have known him."

"Sommerville? I thought the name sounded familiar. The Sommerville of eugenic revitalization. Yes, I know his work quite well, it was vital to some of my own, years ago. I heard he was killed in an accident. I didn't know he had a wife."

"We'd only been married five months," Caroline said softly. She studied a pattern on the opposite wall.

Calvin changed the topic. "Yes; well, then. What do you think of our 'digs,' if you'll excuse a poor pun?" He gestured at the vault of carvings that capped the room.

Caroline snatched at the overture of levity. "I think," she said animatedly, "that I would never have dreamed of living underground until I came here. When I was ten, my parents took me to New Islam on my first offworld vacation, and we saw dozens of mosques with carved lattice domes. They were wonderful, but they couldn't hold a candle to this."

Calvin's smile was a pleasant change in his seamed face. "Interesting that you should compare this to a place of worship. I have reason to believe that these grottoes once housed a religious order."

"It's a kind of monastery?"

"Very much like that. I call it 'the Order of the Caduceus'."

"The caduceus is the Terran symbol for medicine."

"That's correct, but the name's associations fit here, in their way. The cult here was a mingling of religion and medicine." He leaned toward her as though to convey a confidence. "If I'm right, the members studied to attain the capability of curative empathy."

Caroline blinked, not sure she followed what he was trying to say. "I thought the only curing empaths are born that way, and they usually die before puberty. What makes you think someone could *attain* empathy?"

"Have you ever heard of space gypsies?"

"Keeris? What about them?"

"They are the descendents of the race that lived here," Calvin

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said. "And none of them are empaths. Espers, yes, but not empaths. Yet empaths existed here two thousand years ago, before a plague came."

"What makes you think that?"

He lowered his voice. "You're skeptical, of course. But you seem to be a very perceptive woman. I have data from preserved remains of Keeris who died around the time of the plague, yet show signs of having been cured of the plague itself, to die of other causes. I believe an empath cured them. Also, I can read some of the hieroglyphs."

Caroline stared at him. He was completely serious. This world was supposed to be an archaeological enigma, and Dr. Calvin seemed to be keeping his incredible discoveries almost to himself. It didn't make sense. "If empathy is a learnable technique," she said, "that knowledge would be a breakthrough in medicine comparable to—to Pasteur's discovery of microörganisms. Why haven't you contacted Authority to get professional archaeologists here?"

"Oh, I have," he said. "They don't believe me. They said my findings are ambiguous. They warned me to keep out of the tombs."

"Then what you've been doing is illegal." She said it playfully, but he missed her humor.

"That's not important. It's absolutely vital that I find out how the ancient Keeris artificially stimulated empathic healing. I *must* discover it! Think of what it would mean in ending suffering. No price would be too high to find it."

Sitting back in her chair, Caroline looked at Calvin as though she were seeing him for the first time. He reminded her acutely of Paul: the social awkwardness, the singleminded view he took of his work's importance, the incredible drive for knowledge. Calvin wasn't much older than Paul would be, now. She decided she liked the creases around his eyes. She knew they came of too much squinting at computer readouts, but she began to think of them as smile lines. She couldn't imagine what Darwin MacNeil found in Calvin that he disliked so vehemently. Then she noticed the time.

"Oh no, I'm late. I've got to get back." She rose.

Calvin caught at her arm. "Please, Ms. Sommerville, I hope I didn't bore you," he said. "And I am sorry about the poor greeting I gave you yesterday. I hope you'll have time for another chat after your shift?"

She smiled her warmest smile. "That sounds very nice," she said, and headed for the infirmary. She decided she definitely liked Dr. Calvin. He stirred feelings in her that she had thought long

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dead . . . and buried.

"I think we're ready," Telerio Takanna said. He hauled the dummy weight out of the well and unfastened it from the lifeline.

"How many meters of line are there?" Iyevka asked, snapping the lifeline onto the harness at his chest.

"Twenty-five hundred. This well bounced bottom at twenty-one, so you'll have plenty of line if you want to wander around down there."

Iyevka peered into the inky vertical hole into which he was about to drop. He could see down about ten meters, where the illumination of Takanna's mining lamp ended. A stiff, icy breeze came up from the depths.

"Having second thoughts, Andre?"

Iyevka straightened and met Takanna's toothy grin. It was a friendly face, a trustworthy face. "Not on your life," Iyevka said; and, gathering the short loops of slack line, he scrambled over the ledge.

"Okay, Andre?"

"Lower away."

The motorized pulley hummed to life and fed out cable in a smooth descent. Relaxing in the harness, Iyevka looked up, watching the circle of light shrink at the rim of the well. Within a minute, it had diminished to a pinpoint. Complete blackness closed around him, and the peculiar environment of the well pressed on his senses. The updraft stripped away his body heat even through his sealed jumpsuit. The wind penetrated the suit's filters with an odor he hadn't noticed before: dank, like moist earth, with a tinge of sulfur.

Alarmed, Iyevka flashed his lamp into the pit coming up at him. Empty. He switched the lamp off again, feeling foolish, and wondered how long it would take to reach bottom.

As on cue, the speaker at his belt crackled to life. "Half-way mark, Andre. Everything all right?"

"Just fine. I always wanted to freeze to death," he complained, but he was grateful to hear Takanna's voice. He dropped the rest of the way in silence.

Sans warning, solid ground leapt up to meet him and he found himself on his knees before he could orient himself. The cable kept coming down on top of him. "Ho! Telerio! I'm here!"

The cable stopped feeding.

"One small step for a man, . . ." he muttered.

"What was that, Andre?"

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"I said, there's a nudist colony down here."

"What?"

"I said I'm here!"

"Oh. What's down there?"

Iyevka stood up and freed himself from the excess cable, reaching for his lamp. Then he realized that he could *see* the walls around him. They were dimly defined by a delicate glow that seemed to emanate from the stone itself. He shut his eyes and opened them again to check whether what he was seeing was retinal "noise." It wasn't. There was light, and he seemed to be adapting to it very quickly; already he could make out one of the mysterious carvings that appeared at every tunnel intersection. "I think I found another street sign," he told Takanna.

"A what?"

"A street sign. I think that's what the intersection carvings are."

"Speak up, Andre, I can't hear you."

"Turn up the damn receiver!"

"It's all the way up," Takanna said.

"Oh." Iyevka could make out the carving clearly now. It seemed that a natural phosphorescence in the rock, possibly reacting to his body heat, was the source of the glow. It wasn't enough light to move around in, though, so he snapped on his lamp. The sudden glare stabbed his eyes, and he shut it off immediately. When he opened his eyes again, the tunnel had brightened enough to see without the lamp. He saw that he was in yet another featureless tunnel.

"Feed me some slack, nice and slow," he radioed, remembering to raise his voice. "I'm going for a walk."

"It's about time."

Iyevka's footsteps crunched on scattered debris, and he listened to the echoes kick around the passage. There was a turn in the tunnel ahead. Then he heard it: the plink-plink of dripping water. Enduring the blaze of his lamp, he negotiated the downward-spiraling rotation of passage and found himself in a luminous chamber.

There was no altar, no idol, no seating matrix, yet Iyevka knew he was in a place set aside for ritual or meditation. It had that universal quality that transcended architecture or decor, sect or species—a sense of *presence,* perhaps a lingering impression on the place itself of the aspirations and prayers of its users. A wide pool of green-glowing water dominated the chamber. Water dripped into it from a place high in the stalactitic ceiling. Then something moved behind one of the stalactites, and Iyevka swung his lamp to spot-

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light it.

Beady multiple eyes stared down at him from a profusion of thin, hairy limbs. One of the limbs moved to shield the red eyes from the glare of the lamp. Another limb felt around on the ceiling for a firmer foothold.

Iyevka wheeled, scrambling for the vertical well, nearly garroting himself on the tangled line underfoot. "Telerio! Pull me out!"

"Hey Andre?"

"Up, man!" He heard spidery legs scrabbling behind him. "*Get me out of here!*"

He reached the well, the slack line snaking up beside him. The scrabbling sound was closer, and then reflective red eyes came around the turn in the tunnel. Abruptly, Iyevka was yanked off his feet and hauled upward. Spinning, he cracked his head on the vertical wall. The red eyes below him winked out along with everything else.

No one believed him.

Doctor Calvin listened to him attentively, but made no comment, only grabbing some tapedecks and cornering Dr. MacNeil at the other end of the room. Caroline Sommerville nodded patiently as Iyevka repeated his story for her, but she was much more interested in getting the adhesive patch to stick to the shaved spot on his skull. Finally, Dr. MacNeil checked him over and sent him off to rest. Even Telerio Takanna seemed to think it was all an hallucination.

Slumped in a chair in the canteen, Iyevka held his throbbing head.

"Look," Takanna told him, "whatever you saw, it wasn't real. It's true that beings like the Keeris used to live here. But no one's lived on Alcestis in a couple thousand years. No one could. What would they live on; nothing'll grow but mushrooms."

Iyevka shook his head, wincing.

"Maybe you saw a statue, then."

"I saw a living being. It followed me back to the well," the pilot said. "If I hadn't panicked—"

"If you hadn't panicked, you wouldn't have hit your head; and that's all," Takanna said, not quite suppressing a smile.

"I want to go back down and find it."

The smile fell off Takanna's face. "No one's going back down. Haley Druen is sick, and now Yed-Paolor. That leaves me in charge, and there are fourteen rigs to shut down. Soon we'll all be too ill to work. There's no more time for adventure, Andre. Besides—" He

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reached across the table and pulled Iyevka's now-bare hand from his coffee cup. "—look at those blisters. And Doc MacNeil said you're running a temperature."

"So's the doctor, and you haven't accused him of hallucinating."

Takanna frowned, looking suddenly older, more tired. "Look, even if there are Keeris in the wells, they never come up here, so what does it matter?"

"It matters to me! Don't you see? I saw it and ran like a kid seeing his first real dragon. All my training—everything I believe in—told me I should have tried to communicate with it. But all I could think of was that I had to get out of there." An aura of self-disgust projected from him as he slouched back in the chair.

Takanna inspected the bandages on his own hands for a moment, then leaned forward. "Listen, Andre, your case of whatever-we-have isn't as advanced as ours. We need you right here. Maybe after the crisis is over, you and me can go down the well together and hunt your spider. What do you say?"

Squinting skeptically at the engineer, Iyevka managed a look of resignation. "Whatever you say. You're in charge."

Mirrors were Caroline Sommerville's enemies. They chronicled more than the passage of years; for her, they were an inexorable conscience that mocked her with every frown line. She could camouflage the wisps of grey in her ash brown hair; but at forty, she had a face full of sighs. Staring now at her reflection, she waited to see the first blisters encrust her cheeks as they had the backs of her hands. She was the last of the newcomers to develop the infection, which they'd apparently contracted when the ground crew had helped them out of their thermals the first day they'd arrived on Alcestis.

She'd retreated into the washroom to escape the constant bickering between MacNeil and Calvin. She didn't care for this embittered side of the previously genial MacNeil. And, she was finding herself increasingly drawn to Calvin, spending more and more of her time with him. She didn't know why the two men detested each other. She wasn't sure she wanted to know. She just wished they'd call off the battle; people were short-tempered as it was.

After a few minutes, she slapped water onto her face, dried it, reset her features to prim neutrality, and went back into the lab.

MacNeil and Calvin were still at each other, pitted in a verbal duel that roared around the stone chamber. The computers chattered away quietly, sorting data that no one was scanning.

"Your suppositions are based on pure fantasy," MacNeil barked.

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"We don't have time to chase after Iyevka's hallucinations—or yours. There are half a dozen people dying in the next room!"

Florid with indignation, Calvin practically sputtered. "Then stop speaking to me as if I were some irresponsible, raving lunatic. I'm a scientist! I have proof!"

"Some scientist. You'd gamble lives and precious time on a myth."

Calvin picked up a box of tapedecks and slammed it on the table in front of MacNeil. "If you'd look at the evidence, you'd know I'm right. If we've got the Keeris' plague, then finding the secret of the Caduceus is our only chance."

MacNeil caught Caroline's withering look. He bowed his head, took a deep breath, and spoke more calmly. "I did look at your 'evidence.' But you're so goddamned wrapped up in your treasure hunt that you're oblivious to everything else. Even if there were a Caduceus once, it couldn't save its own race from the very plague we're fighting now. They *died,* J.D. The Keeris here are all *dead.*"

"The gypsies are Keeris, and they're alive," Calvin said. He pounced on MacNeil's attempt at reason. "And your pilot saw a living Keeris in the pits. Some of them survived, so there has to be a cure. There has to be."

MacNeil hammered the computer console. "Yes, there's a cure! It's right in this data; or we're all dead."

"The computer will tell us nothing. Not in time."

"Then I hope you've made out your will." MacNeil turned back to the console and punched the reset button. Over his shoulder, he said, "Are you going to help with this morning's test results, or are you going back to the infirmary?" His voice carried a tone of dismissal; and Calvin complied, vanishing into the next room in silent fury. MacNeil turned his gaze on Caroline—as cold a stare as she'd ever seen. "And what are you going to do, stand there all day?"

Stung, she followed Calvin.

In the infirmary, she went directly to the ward monitor and checked to see which of the fifteen patients were due for medication. MacNeil was prescribing a pan-spectrum antibiotic, which seemed to slow the disease in some of the patients. She loaded an inject-gun with the drug and made the rounds.

As she approached, Andre Iyevka looked up from the patient he was tending.

"How do you like your new career as a nurse?" she asked, forcing a smile.

He shook his head, eyes grim. "I don't know how you can do it, day after day."

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"You get used to it," she said. Setting the injector, she uncovered Iyevka's patient to give him the shot. Takanna was unconscious. Iyevka looked miserable. "Don't worry, he's holding his own—"

Conversation was aborted by a piercing alarm. Dropping the injector, Caroline scrambled to get the emergency kit and hurried after Calvin to the bed of the endangered patient.

Yed-Paolor's skin had gone the frightful orange of Freyan asphyxiation. Calvin jerked the pillows out from under the woman's heads and demanded the respirators. Caroline slapped one into his hand and pressed the other over the Freyan's heteroplastic face. The lungs inflated, deflated, but neither brain initiated another inhalation. Calvin filled the lungs again mechanically. No response. Again. Nothing. Grabbing an injector, he shot stimulants into each neck artery in the hope of jolting at least one brain into autonomic function, but it was useless: the Freyan had decided to die. Her skin was flushed to near-scarlet.

"All right!" Calvin stood back helplessly and watched the encephalon readings plummet. "All right." His voice wavered. "Die if you want to."

After a long minute, he reached over, removed the respirators, and switched off the monitors. The corpse relaxed. The lidless faceted eyes filmed over, and the Freyan's faces set in tranquil expressions. Caroline Sommerville, who had seen many friends die, sobbed in the privacy of her mind.

Behind her, unnoticed until now, MacNeil spoke softly. "The first one. It's started."

The seventh day at Clifftown Station was particularly quiet. Most of the survivors were in the infirmary. Those still on their feet divided their time between caring for the bedridden and aiding the desperate research effort. The station itself was shut down.

MacNeil pondered the autopsy he'd performed on Yed-Paolor. The cause of the disease was still unknown, but its effects were before him in graphic detail: the Freyan's body was a ghastly clump of intertwined tumors, tissue gone mad. The abnormality had affected every gastrointestinal and lymphatic organ until the torso was strangled with bulk and the vital systems collapsed.

There were the beginnings of the tumors in all of them, now. MacNeil had tried everything he knew: antibiotics, cultured serums, and other chemotherapy; transfusions of circulatory and lymphatic fluids; radiation therapies; electropuncture and electrolytic alignment; treating the symptoms where he could not find the cause.

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All, so far, had been ineffective.

And then Caroline, tired to the bone, mixed up the culture plates. And there it was. MacNeil pounced on the computer scope and sent Caroline scurrying for Calvin.

"That's the culprit," MacNeil said. The scope displayed three slides, each a specimen from a different organ, each clustered with colorless, featureless spheroids that had not been there before.

"What about the other microbes you were tracking?" Calvin asked.

"I ruled them out. They're concurrent infections that our immunological injections would normally have countered. But these are from two-day-old plates. Apparently, it doesn't show up on fresh slides. It was an accident that we even looked at these."

Calvin nodded, peering at the glassy spheroids. He reprogrammed the moleculanalyzer, and the computer constructed a holo of the atomic structure. The spheroids were featureless to the eye, but their molecular composition was bizarre. Several of the valences were anomalous.

"An insidious thing," MacNeil said. "It wrecks our immunology, opens the gates to other infections, and meanwhile fills us with tumors like some amok supercarcinoma. And I have no idea what it is. It isn't a spore, or a bacterium, or even quite a virus."

"But an ugly killer," Caroline breathed.

Eyes narrowing, Calvin turned to MacNeil. "Darwin, now more than ever, we have to find out how the Keeris' descendents survived the plague. If the secret of acquired empathy is still known—"

"Not that again!"

"Admit it, Darwin." He jabbed a finger at the monitors. "We can't fight that thing. Iyevka saw a Keeris, here, and if a Keeris survived, there must either be an immunity or a cure. And a cure is what we need!"

"Andre didn't see anything. He's hardly more than a kid." MacNeil eased back in a chair. He was beginning to ache inside.

"We have nothing to lose by hunting the Keeris."

"We'd lose time," MacNeil growled, "which we have very little of. There are several treatments we haven't tried yet."

"No, you haven't tried standing on your head, or signing a treaty, or farting on the slides!"

MacNeil did a slow burn. "Ms. Sommerville," he said neutrally, "one of us should be on call in the infirmary. Would you take that post, please?"

Caroline threw him an inscrutable look and left.

When the door had shut, he glared at Calvin. "You jackass! You

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ignorant, glory-seeking son of a bitch!" When Calvin made no reply, he added, "I never wanted to see your goddamned face again, but here we are and we're stuck with each other. At least have the decency not to undermine morale by attacking me in front of my staff. And while I'm on the subject, I don't like what you've been up to behind my back. Keep your slimy hands off my assistant!"

Face flushing, Calvin jerked up straight, but his voice was deadly quiet. "Unless you have a personal claim on Ms. Sommerville, I suggest that you mind your own business."

"Caroline is my associate and my friend, and I won't have some emotional jackal preying on her sensitivity. She deserves better than you. Just leave her alone."

"You have no right—"

"I have every right," MacNeil said with baiting relish. "What you did to my marriage gives me that right. You're the lowest kind of lecher there is!"

Calvin's temper cracked; but instead of the expected tirade, he launched himself at MacNeil, tipping the chair over backwards and crashing them both to the floor. Papers and slide mounts flew as Calvin pummeled at MacNeil. Fending off the clumsy blows, MacNeil twisted away and captured thin arms. Gaining his knees, MacNeil pinned the arms behind the older man's back.

"You bastard! You stupid bastard!"

"Calvin, calm down," MacNeil said, shaken. "Calm down and I'll let you go."

"No, do what you will, you've got me where you want me," he blurted. "You want your revenge, take it!"

MacNeil shoved Calvin from him, but the bottled-up bitterness poured out. "Twenty years ago I'd have beaten your face in. You damn near killed me when you seduced Ella away from me. Now, you just make me sick." He swayed to his feet, wanting to be away from this man, this room, this planet.

"Is that what you think?" Calvin rolled over and sat against a cabinet. "That I stole her from you?"

MacNeil's malice dissipated, leaving only exhaustion. He flopped down on the lab stool. "What should I think? You were the most prestigious name at the university, the Korbel Prize winner, attractive, single, wealthy. . . ." Despair crept into his voice. "I was a nobody, an intern on a shoestring budget, living in a two-room student apartment with a wife and child. You offered Ella everything she ever wanted. How could I hope to hold on to her?"

Calvin winced. "No . . . Darwin, it wasn't that simple. Ella went

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after *me*."

"Bullshit."

"We were friends once, Darwin, I'm not lying to you. In the beginning, I tried to discourage her, but I'd never had a beautiful woman pay much attention to me before. I wasn't for socializing, you know that. The great Solitary Academician." He closed his eyes, swallowed. "She seduced me. She—so young, so exquisite—*loved* me, she said. And she made a fool of me. Just as she did of you."

"I don't believe any of it."

Calvin only stared at the overturned chair.

"She was the mother of our child!" MacNeil persisted. But his words mocked him. Ella had never wanted the baby, not really. He'd hoped to bind her to him with doting, worshipful attention, and then, with their daughter. But she'd used him. She'd always used him, and he'd let her. And now he knew he'd hidden his wounded ego behind a lie, let it rule his life, forbid him commitment to any other love. In a way, he'd always known the truth of it. *I wonder,* he thought, *who she's using now?*

Calvin seemed to have wrestled out of his own miasma. "You haven't kept track of her?" he said. It wasn't a question as much as an appreciation.

"No. No, I didn't want to know anything. Our daughter got letters from her for a while. Then they stopped coming."

"She left me for Quentin Hsu," Calvin said. "After him, there was Moultren, the concert synthesist. And after him. . . . Lord, what does it matter?"

MacNeil nodded. He sorted through the wreckage of his illusions. Curiously, he felt more relieved than grieved. "Calvin—" he began, then amended, ". . . J.D." His voice shook. "I didn't know any of it." Suddenly, he pushed himself up, crossed the space between them, offering a hand to the older man still on the floor. Their eyes locked in mutual sympathy. Then Calvin accepted the proffered help.

"I suppose," he said, "we'd better get to work on the next tests."

Calvin was too ill to think. He stared vacantly into the mouth of Iyevka's well and contemplated it. It was there. He was there. There was nothing else.

His hands were useless now, gone spongy in a mass of lesions. A day ago he'd become unable to reason with enough clarity to back up MacNeil's research, and now he couldn't even tend the bedridden. But he'd refused to take to a bed himself, though Caroline had coaxed and nagged him. No, he'd had to come here. To the pit. He

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felt as though he still had unfinished business here.

But when he could think, between the long temporal blackouts, he thought mostly of his guilt. People were dying—some were dead—because of him. He'd wanted only good things, to recover lost knowledge, to find a way to end pain. He'd gone about it the best way he knew how. He didn't know why he had failed, or what had gone wrong.

Footsteps approached behind him, and he turned lethargically.

"Jeff?" Caroline's lantern flashed toward him, picking him out of the gloom. She crouched next to him at the rim of the well. A part of Calvin's mind noticed how worn she looked. The blisters blemished her lovely features.

"I've been worried about you," she said. She seemed to mean it. "I think you ought to come back with me to the infirmary."

Calvin blinked in the light, and he came awake slowly, looking around as though this were the first time he realized where he was. He couldn't remember coming here. Then Caroline tugged at his arm, pulling him up. He managed to collect his mind. "Any progress?" he asked.

Supporting him with her arm around his waist, Caroline led him very slowly up the tunnel. "Not yet," she said.

It seemed that she was about to say more, but when she didn't, he didn't press her. Obviously, their luck was running out. His knees grew suddenly weak. "Caroline, I—please, let me sit down."

They hadn't gone ten meters. She eased him down, setting his back against the wall, and slumped down next to him, pointing the lantern at the opposite wall.

"I'm terminal," he said. It wasn't a protest, just the truth. "I won't last another day. We're all going to die here."

"Yes," she said simply.

He tried to see her eyes in the reflected light, but it was too dim. Feeble, he touched at her cheek with one bandaged hand, turned her face to him. Flustered, she met his gaze. He tried to smile. "Darwin said . . . you're still in love with Paul Sommerville. After twelve years."

She closed her eyes, made no answer.

Calvin nodded. Wistfully, he said, "I envy him."

She shuddered to the depths of her soul. "Don't," she said, and put her free hand over his. "Please. Don't."

He saw that she was crying, and swallowed painfully. "I . . . I could love you. Caroline?"

"I know." Her head bowed. "We're dying, Jeff. Darwin went up to

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the radio hut to inform Company Central."

There seemed nothing left to say, and they embraced with soft sadness. They didn't hear the quiet scratching at the well's edge, the scuttering behind it. Spidery limbs the length of a man skittered over the rim, and clusters of red reflective eyes glittered in the gloom.

It was the third shift at Company Central's communications complex on Comstock II when MacNeil called. Rashi Sriram was at the monitors. MacNeil was relieved that it wasn't the first watch's troubleshooter, Jeanne Decoteau. It would have been harder to say goodbye to her.

For it was goodbye. There was no longer hope of finding a cure in time. Eight of the surveyors were dead, the rest were dying; and neither himself or Caroline had the strength of mental acuity to continue the research. Sriram offered to send medical volunteers to continue the research, but MacNeil reluctantly forbade it; the volunteers couldn't possibly find an answer in time to save those already infected, and they might only contract the disease themselves. No, Authority had to be notified. The planet had to be quarantined indefinitely, and he and the other carriers of the plague left to their fates.

Across the communications hut, Andre Iyevka shut down the transmitter. The few clicks were as loud as clods of soil falling on a coffin. Wrapping his arms around himself, Iyevka glanced out at the cold. "Doctor, how long do you think we have?"

Honesty was the only available response. "The three of us should have a few more days. The others won't last that long."

"I watched Telerio die."

"I'm sorry. You shouldn't have stayed. Caroline was with him."

"We were friends."

From his own haze of pain, MacNeil's heart went out to the pilot—so damned young, and rightfully afraid. "He didn't suffer, Andre. None of us will suffer. I'll see to it."

A shout interrupted. Caroline burst abruptly from the tunnel. "Doctor MacNeil!" Her arms flailed wildly. "Doctor!"

MacNeil caught her wrists. "Caroline! What's wrong? You shouldn't exert yourself like this."

"We saw them," she gasped. She couldn't catch her breath. "—saw them—Jeff and I—three of them—we saw—"

"Jeff? Caroline, pull yourself together and make sense."

But she shrugged out of his grasp and clutched at Iyevka. "You

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were right! The Keeris—we saw them too!"

"I wasn't crazy?" he said.

"Three of them," she said more rationally. She swung back to MacNeil. "Jeff and I saw them. They were exactly like Jeff's autopsies, and they were Keeris. They came up out of the shaft Andre went down, and they scared the daylights out of us, let me tell you!"

"What did they do?" MacNeil said, bewildered that he'd ever be asking that question.

"They came right up to our lantern, only they walked upside-down on the ceiling. They had red eyes, and they looked just like the gypsies, with hairy legs and markings on their bodies that glowed. They just looked at us, Jeff and me, and I was so frightened that I screamed, and they turned around and went back down the shaft. And Jeff sent me to get you."

"I'm not crazy!" Iyevka laughed.

MacNeil stared up at the sky through the dome's transparent roof. He'd been wrong about Calvin again—and never so glad to admit it. He dragged in a deep breath. "Mister Iyevka, do you think you're still up to a climb?"

"You bet I am."

"Caroline?"

"I'll take care of things in the infirmary."

"Where's Calvin?"

"I'll find someone to help me get him into a bed."

"Telerio and I left all the equipment we used in a storeroom," Iyevka said. "We can set up the pulleys as soon as you're ready, Doctor."

MacNeil still gazed up at the sky. Stars spattered the zenith. Comstock II orbited one of those twinkling lights, and Jeanne Decoteau was there. "I'll never be readier," he said.

Tired and aching through and through, MacNeil eased down onto a broken stalagmite and closed his eyes, listening to the roar in his ears as it gradually quieted. Iyevka sat beside him and unsealed the collar of his miner's jumpsuit. The breeze was cold, but the hours of trudging had left both of them sweating.

Descending the shaft that Iyevka had gone down earlier, they'd explored the chamber with the pool of glowing water, but it had been deserted. Beyond that room, the catacombs had begun. MacNeil and Iyevka had followed endless galleries, passing numberless tombs. There had been other chambers like the first, each with its greenish pool, none with attendants. Always, the natural walls glowed with

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an unnatural light, transmuting the invisible heat of their bodies into dim but visible illumination.

MacNeil dragged his gloves off and fumbled in his medical bag for the inject-gun. Setting it for a strong stimulant, he slid next to Iyevka and pressed the dosage home against the pilot's bared chest. Then he administered a dose to himself.

"How long have we been at this?" he asked.

Iyevka held his chronometer up to the light. "Almost six hours."

"Seems like six weeks."

"*Da.*"

"How're you holding up?"

"I'm fine," Iyevka lied.

"For a wet-behind-the-ears youngster," MacNeil smiled, "you have your share of pluck."

"You're not doing badly either, Doctor—for an antique."

"Antique, eh? Hmph. Ready for more spelunking, sonny?"

Iyevka's grin was game. "Ready when you are."

Sudden agony scorched through MacNeil's insides and he doubled over. He must have made some pain-sound, because the pilot had hold of his arms and called him urgently. When the inner searing eased, MacNeil straightened.

"Doctor?"

"It's passed," he breathed. "I'm all right now."

Iyevka pulled him up. "Are you sure you can walk?"

Nodding, MacNeil took a deep breath, reached for his gloves—and froze. A cluster of red eyes stared down at him from a few steps away. Scalp prickling, he glanced at Iyevka, who likewise had gone still.

The Keeris had them bracketed. Several hung with acrobatic ease from the ceiling overhead, but at least a dozen blocked retreat on the ground. They made no immediate move, either, and MacNeil took a good look at them. Having seen space-Keeris, he was not repulsed. He'd found them an exotically attractive species, with their glossy, filament-covered appendages, green-marbled abdomens, and startling multiple eyes. But the gypsies were a likable, nonviolent bunch. These two-meter cousins were an unknown.

"Don't move," he whispered, but Iyevka was already reaching toward his pack. Instantly, sticky loops of thread sailed across the intervening space, catching and tangling the pilot's arms. In seconds, both he and MacNeil were immobilized by the extruded silk.

"We're friends!" MacNeil said. "We have no weapons!"

One of the Keeris skittered down from the ceiling to settle itself

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in front of MacNeil. It seemed to study him, as though looking for an appendage he didn't own. Then it reached with one of its forelimbs and touched tentatively at his scalp. MacNeil tried not to flinch. He'd seen the gypsies do this. Esper-talk. He concentrated on thinking friendly thoughts, calming thoughts. *We are friends . . .*

Alien perceptions explored in his skull, but they formed in sensations that approximated language: *Soft-limbed worms speak? Your thoughts touch us!*

We are peaceful beings, MacNeil assured. *We come in peace.*

Truth. Why have you come?

Relieved, he realized the Keeris read only his surface thoughts. *We have an illness. We hope you can help us.*

What can be done?

If you take us to your healers, they may cure us.

The concept of healer precipitated a flurry of confused images. Then, *Explain. Allusion unclear.*

MacNeil reviewed what he knew of Calvin's research, and his hypothesis about acquired empathy. He was careful to emphasize Calvin's scientific interest and the surveyors' ignorance of the existence of sentient beings in the mesa. The Keeris absorbed it, and broke the esper contact.

"What is it doing?" Iyevka whispered.

"Shhhhh."

The Keeris touched, very briefly, the arachnid next to it, which touched the being next to it, and so around to complete a circle.

A council of war? MacNeil wondered, but a cold, hairy pedipalp reached for him again. The impact of combined alien minds nearly jolted him to insensibility. But they probed him, supporting his weight as he sagged.

There seemed to be a madman's argument going on in the back of his head, like hearing a debate from the rear of an empty, reverberating auditorium. He felt as though his brain were swelling, about to boil, but the pressure dissipated as quickly as it had built, leaving only himself and the one Keeris mind.

We shall take you to the Aged One. It cannot help you, but we shall take you to it, as you wish.

The Aged One—is the healer?

Yes. And no. It dissolved the link.

MacNeil's legs wouldn't hold him and he began to slide to the ground, but more appendages caught and lifted him. He squeezed his eyes shut as he was portaged up the cavern wall, comfortably supported in the arachnids' powerful grips.

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The Keeris were agile beyond belief. Despite his dead weight, they skimmed along the uneven ceiling, and in a few minutes entered a brightly lit part of the caverns. The rock faces were finished and sculpted like the chambers the surveyors occupied. Myriad culde-sacs trickled with the glowing water, and in them grew clumps of fungi. Some of the plant-forms, obviously cultivated, were as iridescent as mother-of-pearl. One grotto held mushroom-like shoots that blazed with their own inner light, a saturated magenta, and they perfumed the corridors with a fragrance like cloves.

The group's passage took them by other Keeris, each of which ceased its activities and joined the silent, ceiling-skimming procession. They came to a halt in a vast, vaulted room.

Their bonds released, MacNeil and Iyevka climbed to unsteady feet and looked around. The place was permeated with a compelling aura of sanctity. Ponds of radiant water made an emerald diadem around the periphery, but the center of the room drew the eye: from the highest vault dropped a massive, cylindrical canopy, like a curtain around a Holy of Holies. Woven of the Keeris's own silk, it fell to the surface of the great central pool, reflecting the green glow its full length.

The chamber was filling with Keeris, which scuttled across the floor or took to the ceiling. The one that had posted itself next to MacNeil approached and extended its pedipalp toward his head again, as though asking permission. MacNeil lowered his eyes, trying to relax or accept the communication.

The Aged One is within, the Keeris imparted.

Inside the veil?

Always.

May I enter to communicate with it?

Useless. It cannot.

It is the healer?

Yes. Also, no.

No? Then why were we brought here?

It is what you named Caduceus. It is what you desire.

I don't understand. Why is it the healer, but not the healer?

It is the healer; it no longer heals.

It once healed?

Yes.

But no longer?

Yes.

Why?

A barrage of histories, myths, theories, and private doubts poured

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from the Keeris, information coming so fast that MacNeil couldn't endure the influx. Sensing that, the Keeris disengaged the contact and eased the doctor to the intaglio floor.

His mind cleared slowly. It took him a minute to realize that the arm supporting him belonged to Iyevka.

"Doctor? Doctor, what did it do to you?"

MacNeil hugged his knees. "We're sunk," he said. "Calvin was wrong. There's no technique to acquire empathy. Only a mutant empath who survived the plague but couldn't stop it. And it's senile or demented, now. It hasn't healed anyone since its civilization fell."

"It told you all that?"

"That's the gist of it."

"But there must be a thousand of them here, Doctor." Iyevka waved at the Keeris surrounding them. "Some of them did survive."

MacNeil's head was beginning to throb, whether from the esper links or the disease, he didn't know. But there was something to what Iyevka said. "Let me see what else I can find out," he said. Putting his fingers to his temples, he motioned to the Keeris. Obligingly, the pedipalp descended, and the alien minds touched.

How is it, MacNeil asked, *that the plague destroyed the others, but you still live?*

The Aged One was able to cure some. Eight-tens and two lived to lay eggs. Few hatched live, but we are the children's children's children. The illness comes to hatchlings yet. Some grow; most die.

Natural mutational immunity, MacNeil reasoned. *But the Caduceus cured eighty-two.*

Means? the Keeris questioned.

Means I am confused. The Aged One was the healer of the eighty-two?

So it comes by touch from the forebears.

Oral tradition by touch-telepathy, MacNeil translated. *How is it that you live briefly, then, but the Aged One lives yet from the time of the plague?*

It is the curse of the Stone.

Stone?

The Keeris registered amusement that the Soft One was so ignorant, but it explained patiently. *The Stone gives the curse of life. The Aged One does not die.*

Immortality is a curse?

If life is agony, is not death to be desired?

It was starting to make some sense. *Does the Stone also give the gift of healing?*

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Yes. And no.

Ambiguities again. *How 'yes'?*

The Aged One was born on the Stone.

MacNeil felt hopeful, pressed on. *Then, how 'no'?*

One who only touches the Stone cannot heal. But if one is born there, it becomes the One.

That had the feel of a myth-confused correlation. *How is one born on the Stone?* MacNeil persisted.

You must become the New One.

Can it be done?

Who would wish to take the curse upon itself?

That was certainly straightforward enough. MacNeil thought furiously, trying to piece everything together. The Keeris mind withdrew gently, leaving him alone to think his own thoughts.

The Stone—that was the source of—what? Immortality of a sort, and an incomplete empathy: the healer cured by absorbing the injuries or illnesses of others . . . but *it couldn't heal itself.* When the empathic ability eventually burned out, the empath persisted, sustained by some power within the Stone. All the accumulated suffering was bound up in it, and it had no escape, no relief. The curse of the Stone that came from . . . God knew where.

MacNeil's mind cowered. He knew he was at the threshold of a decision. That "born on the Stone" business—it implied a way to transfer the empathic ability. But, as the Keeris had pointed out, who could face such a fate? None of the Keeris had done so since the time of the plague, though with the high hatchling mortality, even a limited empath would be an enormous boon to the race.

A blitzkrieg of pain ripped through MacNeil again. He gasped, twisting his hands in Iyevka's sleeves, trying to master it, trying to weigh the choices. If he became the One, he would have this pain, and the others', and there'd not even be the mercy of death. He'd go mad, no doubt of it. He'd be a raving, screaming lunatic far into the future, generations after those he might save now would be dust. If he chose the other alternative, he'd still suffer this, but in a few days at most, it would be finished. He'd be dead along with the others.

The seizure was long in passing, this time. As soon as he could control his limbs again, he let go of Iyevka and groped for the Keeris. There was more he needed to know. And time was growing short.

The Keeris mind centered in his again.

Can the Aged One never die at all? MacNeil asked.

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It caught the drift of his thoughts; and while there was not disapproval, there was honest warning. *It is said that if you are born on the Stone, the Aged One will find rest; but there would be none for you.*

Am I permitted to view the Aged One, MacNeil asked, *before I decide?*

It is not forbidden. Only do not touch it while it is on the Stone unless you have made that choice. And it left his mind.

The broad lake was before him, the milky shroud brushing its surface. Within the translucent curtain, MacNeil could make out a dark shape atop a lighter, much larger mass. What would it be like—look like—after all the centuries, all the suffering? Terrified, but compelled, he struggled up, Iyevka helping him.

"Where are you going?" the pilot begged. "For God's sake, Doctor MacNeil, what's happening here?"

The water glowed, pea-green, like Earth's new leaves filtering sunlight. It rippled gently, inviting him, its surface serene. "Wait here," he told the pilot, and stepped into the pool, sinking up to his thighs. It was agreeably warm. He began to wade out to the veil.

All was silence but for the little lapping sounds of the water as he walked, and the muffled roar of distant echoes. His mind lolled into a tranquil, vapid unconcern. The soothing, tepid water girdled his waist as he neared the curtain, and with a soporific lethargy, he lifted it and stooped inside the sanctuary.

For six heartbeats, he stared. Then he came back to life, reeling away into the veil as every cell of his being revolted. He wanted out, had to get *out,* but his legs refused him. He scrabbled in the filmy water and choked and clung to the curtain to keep from going under again.

It was too grisly to contemplate, that seat of all ugliness, that living tangle of disease-infested loathsomeness. Its exoskeleton bulged with deformity, and inner tissue extruded from each abscessed joint, oozing with a cloudy syrup that seeped over the pearly Stone and scummed the veil-ringed inner pond. How the creature still lived was beyond his comprehension. To look at it again was beyond his strength. Stupefied, he could only think, *Not that for me. Not that!*

After an eon of paralysis, MacNeil regained his feet, though the curtain still took most of his weight. The shock receded, and he tried to stifle his asthmatic gasps, calm his tide of hysteria. Forcing his eyes open, he gazed out through the gauzy veil—*away* from the Stone—with a frantic compulsion.

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They were out there: a sea of red eyes, watching. He watched back numbly, gathering what tendrils of sanity he could still find. The Keeris watched, and they waited, hanging from the great ceiling like so many scarlet-sparkled chandeliers, or standing on the vast carved floors like many-legged candelabra. Iyevka, a solitary taper, glowed silver in his miner's jumpsuit. MacNeil tried to read the human's face, but it was too far away. No matter. He knew what they all wanted: a nimbus of breath-held hopefulness filled the room. They were waiting, and they hoped. Their need converged on him like an electrical field, running cold chills over his wet skin. He hugged the veil and shivered.

Decide, they seemed to plead.

I can't! he wailed. *Not that!*

His thoughts wove a flight that touched at home and dreamt of stars, of love; of Jeanne and Caroline and his grown child; of Calvin and the surveyors; of death and songs and shadows; and he chose.

He turned around.

It was a dreary tune that Caroline hummed, not realizing she hummed at all. Had she known, she would have recognized it: *Dies Irae*; and had she had the strength, she would have been annoyed. But it took all her strength simply to stay at her post—the lab chair she'd set by the infirmary's central monitor. Nine of the monitor lights still registered. She watched them for any change, her only aid an inject-gun loaded with sedatives.

The smell of suffering was heavy in the room. She'd kept the deathwatch too many hours. The oppressive odor, the oppressive gloom, the oppressive and constant pain had dulled her other senses and narcotized her thoughts. She barely noticed when the door swung in.

Arachnid forms pushed through the opening and clambered up the walls, and she gawked at them, jamming her gloved fingers into her mouth. But she didn't scream, because two silver-suited humans appeared behind the Keeris, one supporting the other. Stumbling to them, Caroline fixed her gaze on Iyevka, and it had to be a wish-fulfilling illusion, because the pilot was untainted—as healthy as when they'd left Comstock II.

"You found the empath, you found—"

Her eyes fell on MacNeil. Or a parody of MacNeil. His features were lost under the lesions, and he had no neck for the tumorous glands in it. For every symptom Iyevka had shed, the doctor seemed doubly inflicted. Only the pilot's grip kept MacNeil from crumpling.

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But that ghastly face looked up at her, and the leprous lips moved.

"How . . . many?" he rasped. Even his voice was shattered.

She couldn't bear to look at him. "Ten of us," she managed. She made an effort to stand straighter, and didn't realize she'd been falling until Iyevka draped her in her vacant chair. He returned in a moment with MacNeil and arranged him on the floor, kneeling before her. She bit her lip, not knowing what to expect.

The doctor raised his hands, swatched in a silky fabric, and clasped her face tenderly between his palms. "Caroline," he breathed, and his eyes seemed to roll up into his head. Then his grasp tightened, pinching her flesh against her cheekbones; and he went rigid as though electrocuted.

A stab of impossible pain penetrated Caroline and she fell against MacNeil. But it was wonderful pain, the cries of healing tissues, and it cascaded through here, peaking, then ebbing to nothing so quickly that she slipped from the chair and sprawled with MacNeil on the floor.

"Ms. Sommerville? It's all right, it's over now. Let me help you up." Iyevka untangled her from MacNeil and deposited her back on the chair, then bent to aid the doctor.

Never in her life had Caroline felt as exhausted. At the same time, she felt . . . completely well. Holding her breath, she looked down at her arms. The blisters were gone. Hesitantly, she drew off a glove. Her hand was unmarked. Eyes widening, she looked back at MacNeil. If anything, he was more loathsome than before. But behind the sunken eyes was a remarkable preternatural vitality.

"Oh my God. *You.* You're the empath," she breathed. "Can you do the same thing for the others?"

The vitality flickered, then steadied. "Help . . . me . . . up."

Between them, Caroline and Iyevka walked him to the nearest cot. Caroline saw the changes this time. MacNeil's flesh literally crawled. A scream erupted from the patient, then; and MacNeil rolled away from her—was pushed away by hysterical flailing. Caroline held the woman's shoulders until her screams declined into sobs. But the medical monitor showed nearly normal readings.

The empath was a depleted heap in the chair where Iyevka had put him. Leaving the other patient, Caroline ran the monitor remote over MacNeil and tried to decipher the readings. The bp and pulse were impossibly high, the pain level incredible. The metabolic rate was nowhere near that of a human being. Yet there were no signs of imminent breakdown, no dangerous dysfunction. It was as though he'd been infused with an upshifted vitality, like a nuke-

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powered ship overhauled with an ion engine.

Pushing aside her revulsion, Caroline helped MacNeil to sit up straight. "Darwin. Darwin, there are eight more to go. Can you keep it up?"

The monstrosity almost seemed to laugh. "Forever."

No nightmare would ever match the reality to which Calvin awakened. He'd closed his eyes expecting to die, and reopened them to a form of death he'd never imagined. Death by disfigurement.

Appalled, he witnessed the subsequent healings: the physical contact, the sudden rictus, the transfer of the patient's symptoms to the empath. Each successive contact diminished MacNeil's kinship to humanity. The personality dubbed Darwin MacNeil was guttering out. What little would survive would be caged forever in a stinking clump of pain-swamped tissue. Unthinkable.

The last of the surveyors was healed to throat-torn screams, and MacNeil collapsed. Caroline pumped an injector of sedatives into the whimpering form, but the pain reading on the monitor stayed off the top of the scale.

"What can we do for him?" Caroline asked.

"I don't know," Calvin said. "Probably nothing."

Abruptly, the Keeris skittered down from the walls. Two of them faced off and began to spit silk at each other, constructing between them what looked like a cat's cradle. As more silk was added, it became a litter.

"They brought him up that way," Iyevka said. "I think they want to take him back to the Stone, and use whatever powers he has left for their hatchlings."

"We can't let them take him!" Caroline said. "Good God, he'll never see humans again."

"It's no use," Calvin said. His insight shook him. "He's finished for us, Caroline. Look at him. He isn't even human any more."

The Keeris arranged their net around MacNeil, suturing him into it with more loops. The strands joined and covered him like a cocoon, hiding the deformities that had split his silver miner's suit.

"They'll take care of him," Calvin breathed. "He'll be cared for. Forever."

"Or until the next Caduceus releases him," Iyevka said.

Finished, the Keeris lifted the limp form and bore it slowly from the room. Calvin stared after them, his soul in turmoil. He didn't hear the agitated surveyors, didn't notice when Caroline bowed her head into her hands and finally wept. Eighteen people had died in

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this place—because he, Calvin, had let his obsession get the best of caution. It had all gone wrong! This wasn't the "gift" he'd pursued. It was an abomination, a gruesome anomaly of empathy. It was a perverted form of suicide. Or murder.

A hand on his arm startled him back to the present.

"Jeff?" It was Haley Druen, the chief surveyor. "Jeff, listen, what do we do now? Can we get out of here, or are we still carrying this disease?"

Calvin pulled his thoughts together. "The monitors say we're clean of it. But there's no guarantee that we won't come down with it again, or pick up something else in our depleted conditions. We must leave and not come back."

"What about the station?" someone piped up. "What about the oil?"

"Damn the oil," Druen said. "We're calling Comstock for transports and getting the hell out of this hole while we can."

Iyevka roused himself. "They'll put us in quarantine, won't they?"

"They damned well better had," Calvin said. He rose and made his way to the doorway. The Keeris disappeared around a bend in the passage as he watched. To Druen, he added, "Take our medical records to be copied, but incinerate the originals. And make sure Central informs Authority that Alcestis is to be declared a plague world. No one is ever to set foot here again."

"Understood, Doctor. Will you come with me to the communications hut to make the call?"

"I have another matter to attend to," Calvin said. Turning back to the corridor, he saw Caroline watching him. The fear in her eyes held him. She'd read him, seen his decision.

"Jeff," she mouthed from across the room. "Don't do it."

He caressed her with his eyes. How could he explain all the debts he had to pay? He said, "If I'm not back by the time the transports arrive, go without me."

"Jeff!"

He rushed down the echoing passage.

The last four of the survivors were suiting up to make the chilling walk to the transport when the Keeris appeared out of the tunnelway. They bore a slack human form: Darwin MacNeil. He was not the loathsome remnant they'd taken from the infirmary, but the man in his original human state, whole and unblemished. The Keeris eased him into the humans' arms and vanished back into the bowels of their world as Caroline and the others huddled over MacNeil.

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"He's alive," Caroline said. "But he's totally prostrated. We'd better get him back to the clinic on Comstock right away. He needs care."

They hurried to stuff his lax limbs into a thermal, but Caroline left that to the others and turned to stare down the passageway into the mesa. It was vacant, plunged in gloom and silence.

The radio came to life. "What's the delay, Iyevka?" the transport's medic demanded.

"The Keeris just brought back Doctor MacNeil," Iyevka reported. "He's alive!"

"MacNeil?" There was a pause. "What about Dr. Calvin?"

Iyevka's gaze flew to Caroline, and they locked eyes. He passed the comm to her.

"Ms. Sommerville here," she said dully. "Doctor Calvin is dead." In a sense, it was the truth.

"Then come on, let's get out of here before you catch something else," the medic said.

Caroline stepped next to MacNeil and took his arm. He was stirring, not quite conscious; but at least he wouldn't have to be carried to the transport. Pulling him closer, Caroline took one last look through the dome at the frozen little planet clad in twilight. Then she stepped out into the gale, glad to be going home to the stars.

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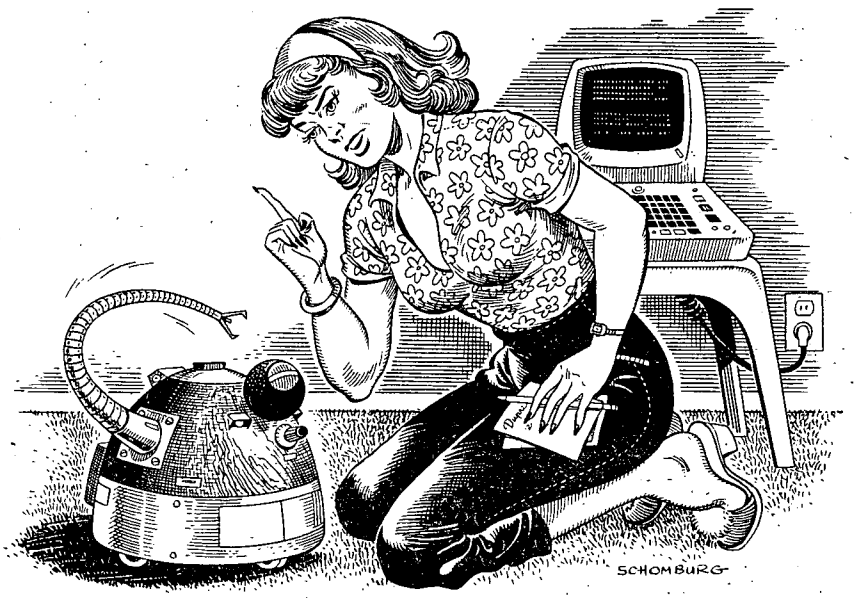
OF DAYS GONE BY

by Dian Girard

art: Alex Schomburg



Undaunted by her last encounter with the Machine (the blizzard of encyclopedia pages unleashed in "... and Settle Down with a Good Book" in the July '79 issue of this magazine), our heroine is ready to do battle—sort of—again. In her working hours, the author, Dian Girard, works on computer programs; in her free time, she works on her own computer and writes stories like this.

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Fascinating, simply fascinating. She peered a little closer at the computer screen, trying to make out a section of cramped and faded writing. Was that a **C** or an **E**? Even with the contrast turned all the way up she couldn't tell. She decided to take a look at the computer's best guess and keyed in a query; but all she got for her pains was **C(E?)**, which wasn't any help at all. Humph.

Cheryl Harbottle was working on her family tree, and so far she was doing quite well. She'd traced part of her mother's family clear back to 1907 already, and it was only 10:00 A.M. Not bad for two hours' work. Over a hundred years! She felt a little bit in awe of the whole thing. All you had to do was type in a name, the type of record and the date and—zip!—it appeared like magic. She had her own birth certificate, the marriage certificates for her parents and grandparents, her great-grandfather's death certificate, and a whole hoard of other miscellaneous information.

Well, she didn't *have* any of it, actually. Not physically, that is. When she found something she wanted she pressed the **copy** key and an electronic duplicate was moved into her private file from the master data base. All very neat and tidy. Now she was getting into the never-never land of the turn of the century—20th, that is. They had been shockingly sloppy about keeping records those days.

Cheryl frowned. Evidentally the next thing to do was to start looking through the census records. She keyed in 1960 and her ancestor's name, minus the middle initial. Heavens! A scroll of names started across the screen, beginning with a Clifford A. Dupre in Autauga County, Alabama. She stopped the display hurriedly and asked for a count. Yowks! There were 36,000 Dupres in the country in 1960. And she'd always thought it was an unusual name. Cheryl tapped her front teeth with a carefully manicured fingernail. As she recalled, he'd been living in New Orleans, Louisiana, when he died. Yep. Okay, she'd try the census again. This time she added the location.

Another scroll of names, and a count of 873 Dupres. Cheryl felt like she was looking at a mother-lode of Dupres. Why couldn't great-grandfather have moved to Los Angeles, where most of the people were named Smith, Jones, or Gonzales?

She certainly couldn't look at all of them. At just a minute each that would take over 14 hours. Even a quick and cursory glance would use up an entire day. She thought it over a bit. Well, he'd been in his fifties when he died, so she could rule out anyone outside of his age range. She re-entered her request, for what seemed like the dozenth time, and came up with a much more satisfying count.

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There were 73 men named Clifford Dupre. Twelve of them had a middle initial of **C** and nine had **E.** Cheryl leaned back in her chair, gnawed her lower lip, and considered the 21 contenders for the honor of being her great-grandfather. She obviously needed more data.

Ah, the ring! In this day of rapidly shifting population and electronic services, people had a lot fewer possesions than they once did; but mementos always seemed to find a home. Cheryl had her great-grandmother's wedding ring. She vaguely recalled that there was an inscription on the inside of it. With a little luck there would be some initials. She got up and went into the bedroom to get out her jewelry box, stepping around Melvin as she went through the door. Melvin was her private name for the Kleen-Sweep. He lived in a small garage in the living room wall and came out punctually every day at 10:00 A.M. and 10:00 P.M. to vacuum debris off of the rugs.

Cheryl found the ring after a little rooting around and took it back into the living room for a better look. There was an inscription. She could read the date easily enough, but the rest of it was in flowing script. She squinted at it, trying to get the light onto the inside surface, turned it over in her fingers, and managed to drop it onto the floor. Melvin ran over it on his way back to his garage. Fortunately it was too heavy for his vacuum pump. He backed up until the bauble was in view of his forward scanner and reached out his corrugated arm.

Cheryl made a dive for the ring. They both got it at the same time. She had the size advantage, but he had a better grip. She could only hold the rim of the ring; Melvin had managed to get the tips of his pincers through the circle. She tugged. Melvin tugged a little harder. Cherly jerked, and the trinket slipped out of her grasp. With what looked like triumph Melvin clicked open his top chute and popped the ring inside. He turned and resumed his interrupted trip back home. Cheryl stepped in front of him. If she lost that ring her mother would never forgive her. Melvin started sideways, to go around the obstacle of her ankles. After a couple of sideways movements that looked like some sort of bizarre dance, Cheryl bent over and put a hand firmly on Melvin's top, holding the little machine down. He lifted his single trunk-like arm and felt over her hand. After revving his motor a few times and finding it useless he retracted his wheels, sat down on the floor and began to utter loud shrill beeps. Cheryl hurriedly let go. She had the awful feeling the neighbors might turn her in for sweeper abuse. Melvin started to move again and this time Cheryl threw herself in front of him. She lay down on her side in front of his small sliding door. He roamed

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up and down, from her toes to her head, trying to find a way through. She considered him.

Melvin was about sixty centimeters tall and looked a little like an antique beehive. He had a round red knob towards the top on one side, with a small round scanner on one side of it and a little high-intensity light on the other. There was a little dial under the knob, which turned to reset his operating timer. His high-impact plastic case was made in a light woodgrained pattern to match the furniture, and he had a flexible arm on his left side. Cheryl had always thought he looked a little like W.C. Fields—especially with that red nose. At the moment he seemed to have a striking resemblance to Jesse James.

The whole situation wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for the fact that Melvin emptied automatically. Everytime he went back into his niche he squatted over a round panel with an iris mechanism. The panel dilated and Melvin excreted. Maybe that was part of what made the little machine so human. He had to go, just like everybody else. The time they had a birthday party for the twins and invited thirty other children over had given him a bad case of diarrhea. It must have been all the confetti.

Reflecting on Melvin's personal problems didn't alter the case. If he once got into his cubby hole, Great-grandma's ring would be gone for good. Or would it? An awful lot of trash was recycled. Almost everything, in fact. That meant it had to be sorted some way. Surely other people lost things to the disposal system now and then. There might be a way to retrieve lost items. Cheryl sat up with her back to the little door. Melvin circled around to the wall and nudged at her side. She might be able to just sit there until his batteries ran down—recharging was another thing he did when he wasn't roaming around the apartment—but as she recalled he was good for twenty hours. She reached out a hand and poked him in his red knob nose with a forefinger. He backed up and blinked his scanner at her. Cheryl pulled a heavy footstool in front of his door and left him to explore it while she called Maintenance. Maintenance was understanding, and didn't act like she was *too* much of a dimwit. There was indeed a recovery procedure. You filled out a claim form on the computer, with identification of the lost item and the number of the disposal district where it had been lost. The only hitch was that there was only about a 20% recovery rate. Since the system was completely automatic, most trash was sorted and on its way to being recycled within ten to twelve hours. At that rate Granny's ring might be part of something else by the time the disposal people were

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reading the claim. As a matter of fact, Cheryl could almost see the ring being spread into plating to cover the electronic contacts built into some other household's version of Melvin. No way was he going to get back through that door until she had the keepsake safely in hand!

She went into the bedroom and took her screw driver out of a drawer. After a rather unnerving incident with her automatic printer a few years ago she'd gone to an antique store and spent an exorbitant amount for a nice sturdy screwdriver with a heavy-duty handle. When she came back Melvin was still moving soulfully around the footstool. She didn't want to disable the little machine: it would seem too much like hurting him. They had bought him nearly two years ago, and he was almost like a pet. He had actually lived up to his warranty. He was quiet, efficient, and maintenance-free. She had never even needed to call the company for any adjustments. The kids were fond of making mazes out of furniture for him to go through, and liked to tie colored ribbons on his arm and watch him try to get them off. No, she certainly didn't want to hurt Melvin. Still, there had to be a way to get at his innards. If only she had his instructions. The salesman had mentioned an instruction card when Melvin was installed, but it seemed to have disappeared in the intervening years. There probably wasn't anything on it except for the computer link number to the company anyway, or maybe directions for resetting his clock if you wanted him to make his rounds at a different time. It *was* sort of unnerving for dinner guests to have the vacuum cleaner nudging their ankles while they were trying to eat their baked Alaska. But anyway, she knew all about that. She'd done it several times. She confronted Melvin.

The first thing she tried to do was slide the screwdriver into the joint around his hopper. He scurried sideways and beeped anxiously when she tried to hold him down. The screwdriver wouldn't fit into the slit anyway: the blade was too thick. She wasn't quite sure what his underneath looked like and felt around his lower edge carefully to be sure there were no sharp edges or macerating gears. By now she had him backed into the corner between the wall and the footstool. He didn't like it—shrilly. The neighbors would just have to put up with it. She wasn't sure she could for very long. It was an awful noise. Having assured herself that he presented no immediate danger to her hands she grabbed him by the lower edge and tipped him over gently. The previous noise was nothing to the racket he was putting up now. His underside had a round plate with an iris opening like an old camera, three round caster-like wheels, and a

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set of scanners. Evidentally the vacuum mechanism was hidden behind the round plate. She couldn't see any screws, bolts, or buttons. She poked gently at the irised plate, but it didn't look like anything that would open without damage.

The next thing she did was pick him up. This was not without effort because he weighed about 40 pounds. First she held him by the lower edge and shook him right-side up. His single arm flailed helplessly as he screeched over the indignity. Then she laboriously turned him over and shook him upside-down. Neither of the actions produced anything except a lot of sweat on her part. Finally she set him down again, right side up, to give both her arms and her ears a rest. She sat crosslegged in front of him and pushed his red nose, his front scanner, his light, and anything else that looked pushable. Nothing.

Maybe she could trick him. She got up again and went back to the bedroom. There were three or four small items in her jewelry box that she didn't care much about and felt like risking. If this didn't work she was going to have to call the Kleen-Sweep company anyway, and she would get everything back. Calling them would have to be a last resort because A) she resented paying the highway-robbery charges and B) service personnel seemed to have taken courses in how to make their clients feel like utter fools. It was like having to call a plumber to get your contact lenses out of the sink trap. Cheryl bent down and put the small trinkets on the floor about four feet apart. Then she put her screwdriver under her arm and picked up Melvin again. She staggered across the room with him, trying to ignore his shocked protests, and put him down on the far side of the pieces of jewelry. She took her screwdriver in hand and waited. Sure enough Melvin ran over the first piece, backed up, and picked it up with his pincers. He was too fast for her. The chute popped open and the brooch disappeared before she had a chance. The next time she was more successful, mainly because he'd taken her shell choker and it took him two tries to get it down his gullet. She slipped the blade of the screwdriver under the chute panel and kept it from closing.

She dropped to her knees and put her free arm around her hive-shaped servant. He set up his shrill cries again and Cheryl muttered, "Your garbage or your life!" as she tried to pry up his cover. She was afraid to use too much force because she might chip the plastic. Maybe the solution was to stuff something larger in the opening. She bent over and peered under the lid. Either that, or she could try fishing things out through the narrow gap her wedge had made.

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The trouble was, she didn't have anything she could bend into a hook. Up until a couple of years ago she could have used a fishhook, but her husband had given up angling for stamp collecting. A spoon, maybe? She let go of Melvin and watched for a moment to make sure he couldn't pull the screwdriver loose. He did finally get a good grip on the shaft, so she picked him up again, with his arm pinned down to his side. Aside from the fact that he was shaped funny it was a little like lugging around a squalling little kid. She staggered over to the Autochef and, resting Melvin on her hip, used her free hand to dial up a dish of chocolate and raspberry parfait. That came in a tall dish and would have a long spoon. Iced tea might have been better, but she couldn't recall if that came with a spoon or just a straw.

When the dessert came up through the Autochef table, she picked up the spoon and went back across the floor with it and Melvin. She plunked herself and the machine down on the rug and imprisoned Melvin firmly between her crossed legs. She sent a quiet thanksgiving to her mother, who had always insisted that anything but metal tableware was unfit to use indoors. A plastic spoon wouldn't have bent. This one, as a matter of fact, was gold. Since the tableware came with the Autochef service, it only cost a few cents more to have silver than stainless steel and only a few cents over that to have gold instead. Nice; it bent easier. A few moments more and Cheryl was scrounging around in her vacuum cleaner with a twisted 24-carat spoon. No good. She could feel something clink against the spoon, but she couldn't get it up through the opening.

Cheryl pulled the mutilated spoon out and tossed it down on the floor. Melvin had managed to get his arm free and was pulling at the screwdriver again. She unlocked her ankles, rested her chin on her hands, and considered. Evidentally it was last-resort time. She got up, setting Melvin free, and bent over to pull the screwdriver out of his case. He trundled towards his garage again. The gold spoon was in the way. He ran over it and then backed up, swinging his arm down to pick it up.

"Oh no, you don't!" Cheryl said. "They'll charge me extra if that doesn't go back with the dish." It was a little too far to reach the spoon. Her hand slid back up Melvin's front and caught his red knob nose. He moved back, as he always did when thumped on the front. There was a sharp click; and the knob, which Cheryl always turned to set his timer, pulled out about a half inch. Everything came to a halt. Melvin's light went out, his wheels retracted, and—what was more—his top flipped open. She looked down, startled.

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Under the hatch lid there was a white plastic basket with a bail handle. It was about six inches in diameter. Cheryl hooked her fingers under the bail and lifted it out. A small label on the side said **Saf-T-Pail**. It was about eight inches deep and there was a myriad of items in it. Great-grandmother's ring was there, naturally. Cheryl took that out immediately and slipped it on her own finger. There was the brooch and choker she'd used for bait. There was also the Kennedy half-dollar that had vanished almost a year ago, several small trinkets the boys had missed, and a little china pitcher that belonged in the twins' dollhouse. All the way at the bottom of the plastic bucket, resting neatly on the bottom grid, was a little three-by-five inch plastic card. Block letters at the top said **Model 805 Kleen-Sweep—Instructions.** There was the company name and computer link number, instructions for setting the clock, and instructions for emptying the top and bottom debris containers. A short paragraph at the top said, "Your Kleen-Sweep is especially designed to avoid loss of small valuables. The Saf-T-Pail (top debris container) can only be emptied manually. Holds up to two liters." Cheryl rocked back on her heels, considering first the card, and then Melvin. She remembered now. When Melvin was installed there had been a certain amount of litter lying around. She told the installation people not to bother about it because she would get a kick out of watching the Kleen-Sweep clean it up. The card must have been lying on the floor. Melvin had eaten his own instruction card. The sneaky little rascal!

Cheryl carried the two-year accumulation of lost trinkets over to the table and set them down. She put the Saf-T-Pail back in place and pushed in Melvin's funny red nose. She also moved the footstool and watched while he trundled off to his well-earned rest. Nice little fellow, really. She took off Great-grandmother's ring and looked at it rather absently. She still couldn't make out that middle initial. She set it down on the table too, picked up the chocolate raspberry parfait and the twisted gold spoon, and went over to do what she should have done in the first place. She keyed in a number and took a few bites of parfait while the connection was being made. A friendly-looking lady with gray hair appeared on the screen.

"Hi, Grandma," Cheryl said. "Say, do you recall what your father's middle name was?"

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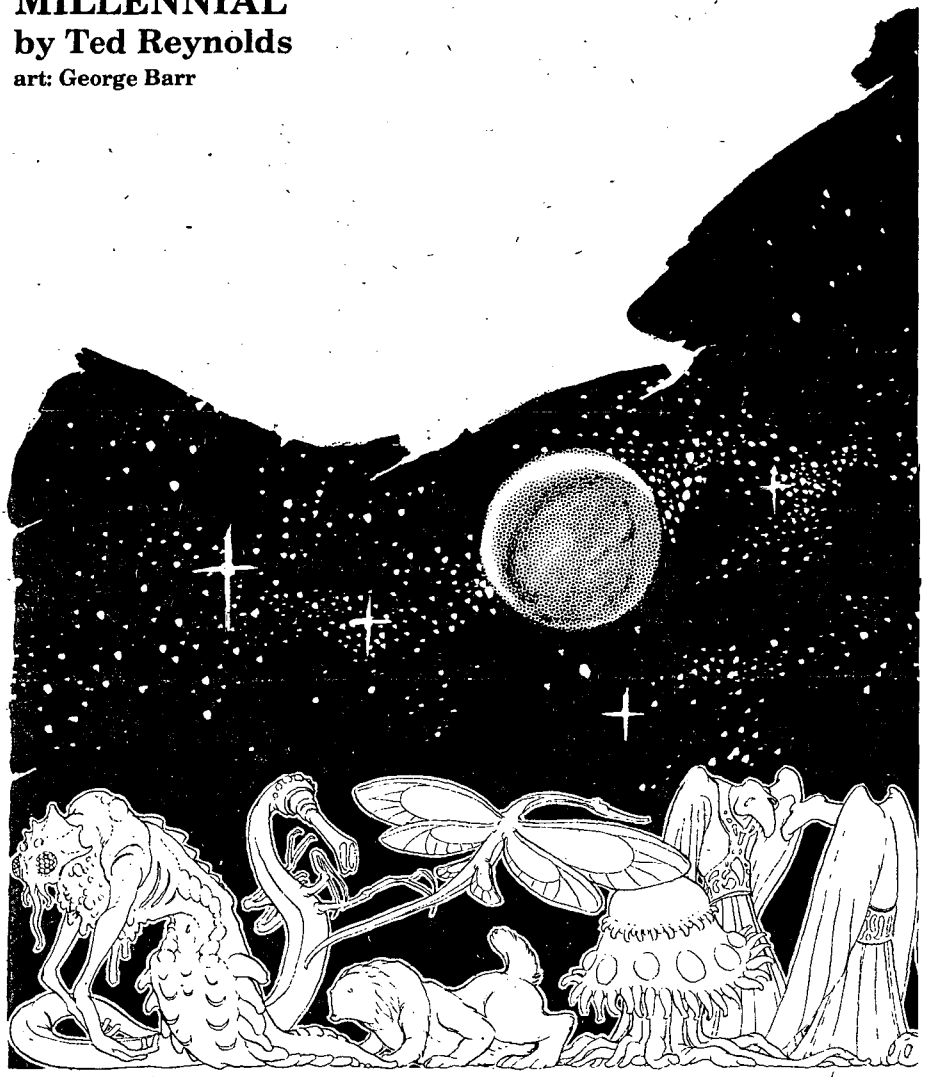
MILLENNIAL

by Ted Reynolds

art: George Barr



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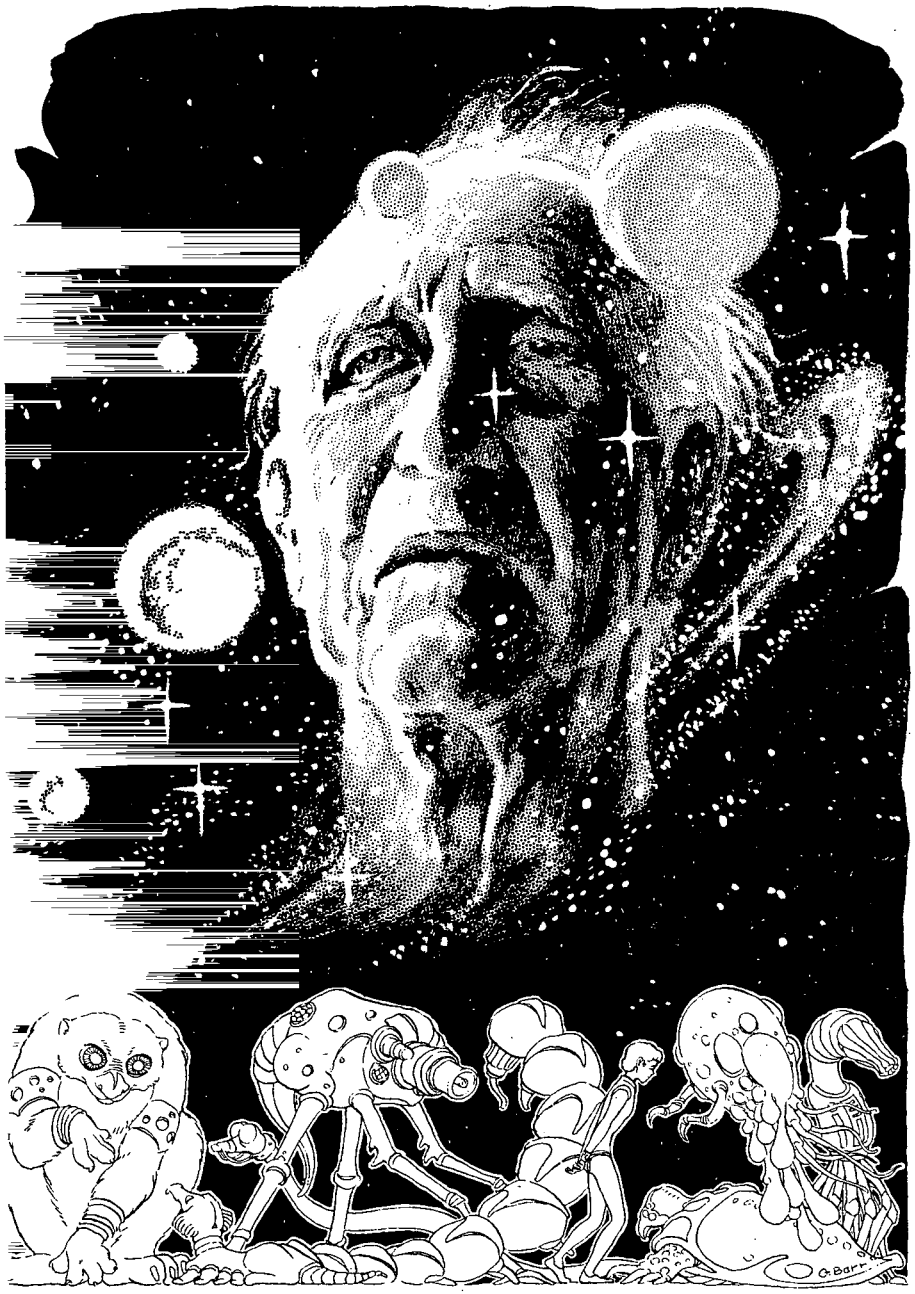

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This story, the author claims, is one of a series, none of which share characters, settings, or themes. We can only suggest that you watch this space carefully. For those who are still following Mr. Reynolds' archipelagic travels, please add Indonesia and the Bahamas to the list.

"Two thousand light years to Sol," the cleaning hose remarked, unsolicited, as it crawled past Janaki down the corridor.

So it wasn't a cleaning hose after all. Now that it had drawn his attention, Janaki could see the shining spots at two-foot intervals along its leathery length, announcing it as a sentient, rather than an item of Ship's equipment. The boy wasn't familiar with that species, but there were so many in the Ship.

Janaki turned back to the viewport and leaned his forehead against the cool pane. Lost out there among those glimmering star meadows was Sol, too distant to see anyway. If he could see its light, it would have travelled fifteen of his short lifetimes; he would have seen the long-dead image of a sun shining on a single inhabited human planet. A lonely isolated world; as his brother Omar said, "all human egos in a single basket." It was all too long ago to be interesting.

"Return to Manplace," another voice enunciated with careful punctiliado from nowhere. "It is time for your midday meal."

This sentient was a tiny slug, Janaki noted, smeared to a corner of the viewport. It was so small he couldn't be sure of the color of its spot, but that didn't matter. The pecking order was easy to observe for a human. *Any* of the Others could order an Earthing about.

Reluctantly Janaki turned down the corridor that led inShip. Descending a ramp to Twelkemeer Concourse, he strolled past bustling shopperies to the uptubes. He dawdled as much as he dared, stepping aside to let a phalanx of Barians lumber by on stiff stocky legs, running his hand along the serrated spine of a Parikh lying

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asleep under the monorail line, playing briefly with a Mortine fledgling until its nestmom oozed out and curled around it reproachfully. At a branch leading off towards Central Control, the boy turned in that direction, whistling nonchalantly as if he had every right to be there. Within three steps his path was barred by a large Other.

"No," it intoned tonelessly. "You err, Earthing. Manplace lies thusway." It flipped a wingtip towards the other branch.

"Oh, my!" said Janaki in mock embarrassment. "How *could* I have so erred. A thousand pardons, oh, friendly monster." He bowed, his tongue protruding, and skipped back towards Manplace. Drats!

"1992 light years to Sol, Earthing," the Other called after him.

The gates to Manplace were closed as always. Janaki had to wait for one of the Grangh from the neighboring warren to notice him and come out to let him in.

"Good day, Janaki," said Bracg as he emerged from Granghome. "Did you know it's only 1988 light years to Sol?"

"Who cares?" said Janaki. "No one's going there any more, anyway."

"True, youngling," agreed Bracg, the eyerow ringing his throat blinking lazily. "But is it not the home of your species? Did you not spring from there? Do you not feel a special sympathy for your ancestral birthplace?"

"Naw," said Janaki. "It was just another star like all of them. And there's nothing there any more."

"I see," said Bracg. "Well, peoples differ." He extended the entry card and inserted it in the gate slot. The bolts slid back and the gate opened. Janaki entered and Bracg swung the gates shut behind him. He heard the bolts sliding home again.

Janaki stood in the entry removing his noseplugs and glasses while the air conditioners hummed in the walls. Manplace was located in the land-based, optic-spectrum, oxygen-atmosphere slice of the Ship, of course; but the public corridors were keyed to an averaged balance rather corrosive toward humans. Artificial aids were advisable.

Then he swung open the door from the entry and entered his home.

Manplace: 30,000 cubic meters that felt right. Air, warmth, light, style, furniture; all comfortable for man. If only it weren't so dull here. If only the family ever did anything *interesting*, he might not spend so much time outside. Gramps was always after him about that, and you could tell Omar didn't like it either.

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He stood by the door, rubbing off his identity spots. He hated them, but they had to be worn outside Manplace. They were the only way for a sentient to announce itself as such, but their particular mauve color was the sign of human inferiority and restriction.

Jenoatha looked up from her knitting and smiled. "You barely made dinner again, Janaki." Her long hair, black as night with soft blue tints where it caught the lamplight, set her off from the other four in the family. She was the outsider, whom the Others had brought in from some other ship when Omar was of age to need a woman. She had been the first proof for twenty years that there was more than one family of humans left in existence. But she never would talk of her own family or her earlier life.

Omar sat in his chair, reading again. Omar read a lot, thought a lot, and talked hardly at all. From the little he said, Janaki thought his brother must have much to say that would be interesting, maybe frightening; but Omar had never shown much interest in communicating with his thirteen-year-old sibling.

Their mother, Edma, brought a load of dishes from the kitchen. "Oh, hello, Janaki. Could you help me? The turken's almost ready for basting. What did you see out there today? You have to tell me all about it. Change your clothes, and come into the kitchen. Gramps was snorting about you again, I'm afraid." She hurried off into the kitchen again. Edma *did* talk a lot, Janaki thought, but she sure didn't ever say much.

"I wish Gramps would be a bit more discreet in his 'snorting'," commented Jenoatha. "I sure wouldn't want any of the Others to hear what he was saying today about the Millennial."

Omar looked up from his book. "I can imagine. And I can sympathize. Did you expect him to like the idea? He despises everything the Others lay on us anyway. And for them to expect us to *commemorate* what happened a thousand years back . . . ?"

"But, dearest," said Jenoatha, chin in palm, eyes gazing dreamily at Omar, "haven't you the impression there's something *behind* this commemoration the Others haven't mentioned? Don't you feel it's a very good time for us to show that we've *learned* something, that we *accept* what's happened?"

Omar dropped his book wearily to the floor. "Jen," he said stiffly, "for your own sake, if you're on one of your they're-going-to-let-us-off-probation kicks, forget it. They're going to be treating us just the same after one thousand and one years as after nine hundred ninety-nine. You're just hurting yourself, imagining these things."

"But if they *are* reconsidering . . . " said Jenoatha. "Just *if* . . . and

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they hear Gramps saying those things . . ." Her voice fell into silence as she watched Omar's face. She picked up her knitting again.

Janaki thought: every word they say is so predictable. Am *I* that obvious from the outside? I'll never be! I'll be sure to do or say at least one thing a day that *I* don't expect of me, rather than repeat myself all my life like that. He wandered into the kitchen.

"There!" said his mother, as she turned from the oven, the steaming platter of broiled bird in her hands. "I'm done. Put this on the table, and call your grandfather."

Janaki took out the turken, and then crossed to Gramps' cubicle and knocked. He waited a while and knocked again. Gramps would be living through humanity's glorious past once again, and it always took him a while to come back. He didn't take being brought back graciously either.

Gramps' door slid open and his craggy face stared down at Janaki. "What the Hell . . ."

"Dinner time, Gramps," said Janaki hurriedly. "Mom sent me to call you."

His grandfather snorted. He emerged, shirtless, and moved grumpily to the dinner table.

"You've been out *there* again, Janaki," he said severely, as he slid into his place at the head of the table. "Why do you let the boy run out hobnobbing with those beasts, Edma? There is absolutely nothing out there that can be worth his wasting his time over."

"I'm sorry, Gramps," said Janaki. Thinking: how would Gramps even know? He's never been out of Manplace since I can remember.

Edma spoke up diffidently. "Janaki's all right, Dad. He's just a lad, and curious. The Ship's still interesting to him."

"The Ship!" Gramps spat caustically, as if the act replied sufficiently to any forthcoming comment on the subject.

Janaki couldn't restrain himself. "But Gramps, what's so bad about going out? The Ship's just a *place* . . . a lot of places; and it's full of a lot of interesting kinds of people, some good, some bad, just like us. . . ." He stopped abruptly, his grandfather's blackening features warning him too late that he had gone too far.

"People?" roared the old man. "*People?* They are animals!" His voice dropped to a hiss as he emphasized each word. "Those things are nothing but crawling . . . bestial . . . inhuman . . . *animals*! Not people! And don't you *ever* forget it, boy." He swung towards the adults. "It's your fault, you women. You toady up to those brutes, and humor them, and mimic them, and try to be *like* them, by God . . ."

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His cheeks puffed angrily, like a startled Mortine's.

Jenoatha spoke carefully, soothing. "Do you guys think, just for one meal, we could drop certain subjects? This *is* the Millennial."

Gramps glared at the young woman.

"Millennial, yes. The Millennial of cowardice and of shame and of treason!

"Don't talk like that," said Jenoatha rapidly. "They might be listening. We've got to show them we *accept* the situation . . ."

The old man rose, a pillar of righteous wrath. "Accept! Never!!! Man will never accept what the Others have done, not while he remains Man." His stormy eyes swept the family. "All of you bending and licking and fraternizing with . . . with Them. It's more than enough to make a *man* sick to his stomach." He pushed his plate back with the horny back of his hand. "You miserable toads celebrate our degradation if you choose. Myself, I have no stomach for it."

He glared around the table once more, daring a reply, and then turned from the table and stalked away. The door of his cubicle slapped with finality.

Finally Omar pulled his own plate forward. "Did you think he'd react differently?" he asked quietly. "Did you think he'd *approve* of Millennial?"

"I hoped . . . " began Jenoatha, and paused. "I guess not."

"The Others have asked us to go out in the evening." reminded Janaki. "Some sort of ceremony on the 90th observation deck. How's Gramps going to react to that?"

"Badly," said Omar. "Can anyone change that?"

He looked around the family. The humans shifted uneasily.

Omar said, "All right, then. Let's eat."

Edma held out her hand. "Blessing first," she said firmly.

Jenoatha looked doubtful. "Without Gramps?"

"We'll include him in our hearts," said Edma.

The four bowed heads and linked hands in the immemorial gesture.

"To the memory of Sol," said Omar, after a short silence. "And Earth. And Man."

The squeeze of hands ran around the table.

"Now we eat," said Edma with great heartiness, wiping her eyes.

Manplace. The cubicle of Osyp Skidgell (Gramps). 1850 light years from Sol.

The lights dimmed.

Bookcubes, charts.

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Holographs of long-dead places.

Icons of lost-gone heroes of Man's history.

A reproduction of *Guernica* on the wall above the bed.

The old man sitting at his desk before the solidograph tank.

He punched up a solido of the Galaxy in the tank, frozen in the void; brought the time to twelve hundred years in the past. Firefly glints swam before him in the tank, millions past counting.

Gramps brought the scan nearer. A trailing spiral arm loomed in the view. He checked its growth and peered into it with aging eyes. Two thirds of the way out the limb a small blotch of red appeared. He readjusted dials and expanded the view again. Slowly the region swelled, clusters of stars and streamers of gas looming and vanishing beyond the borders of the tank, until the red had almost filled the visible area. A thousand stars shone in red radiance, a brilliant cluster of ruby sparklets . . . Manrule.

Cocking his head to one side and rubbing his bristly chin, the old man eyed the complex for a while, gaze and mind wandering from one spark to another, cataloging, recalling their names and histories. Procyon, Lebitz, Wolf, Cygni, Galoon, Fremenial . . . each brought to his memory the shapes of worlds and deeds.

Squinting into the tank, his face bathed in the red glow, the old man thought he could pick out the minute blood drop of Sol itself. Fixing his gaze upon it, he slowly spun time backwards with his left hand on the dial. The red contracted, spark after spark slipping from ruby to diamond, until only that single speck shone redly in the gloom. 1850 years ago . . .

Gramps closed his eyes tight, tight, and imagined that spark grown to a golden sun, beating warmly down on its lovely worlds, Mars and Titan and Ganymede and Mercury and Earth itself, worlds of men, full of men, and ruled by men for men. He felt, beneath his feet, the solid earth which he had never actually known. He saw the crystalline cities spiring upwards, human cities for human bodies and minds and hearts; glimpsed the star ships lifting through azure skies, bound outwards towards human tasks on yet other human worlds.

He opened his eyes and sighed softly. They were gone, those days. But they lived again through him, while he lived.

The old man sorted and resorted his data, spinning on through the centuries, and the red pool spread again outwards in the tank, leaping from star to star. He pulled bookcubes from the shelves to set by his side. He projected planets to swim in the corners of his room. Continents blossomed with Man's constructions on the edges

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of the desk. Fleets hung in the cubicle's dusky emptiness. Again for the old man the battles were fought, and again the red pressed outwards.

The heroism of the Pleiades, the grandeur of the Bellatrix advance, the glory of Kartoud; a thousand human worlds . . .

Eleven hundred years ago, he stopped the unrolling flow of history and sat in dark silence for a long, long time.

Then he turned back a thousand years, and played it all over again.

Janaki moved quietly through dimly-lit corridors and vast squares gloomy to his eyes. Sentients swarmed about him and ignored him completely. He was coming in towards the Ship's center through the segment occupied by land-based, oxygen-atmosphere, infra-red seeing beings. This meant, of course, they all could see him far better than he could see them; but it also meant a dearth of those sentients who were likely to view and identify humans routinely. So far it seemed to be working.

It had been easier to get this far than he had expected. A hundred times before he had tried to cross the limits, only to be turned back, politely but firmly, by the first sentient, of any type, to spot him–and twice by cleaning apparatus.

But this evening he had simply covered up his identity spots with skin-tinted plastic . . . and had strode across the invisible line without attracting any notice at all. And he was still being ignored as if he didn't exist.

Janaki crossed from corner to corner of a huge gloomy space where floating bladders, spots gleaming phosphorescently, hung high up among incomprehensible constructions. Far above them a transparent ceiling framed a rectangle of shining dust and sparking suns. So many, even in that small bite of arc. How many in the Galaxy? How many in all the galaxies?

He remembered Omar telling him the only sure way of knowing which of the further galaxies were inhabited. "By the chance of stellar physics we should expect about ten supernovae per average galaxy in a thousand years. There are galaxies which haven't shown a single supernova in the billion years ours has been watching; so we know someone there has solved *that* problem. On the other hand, there are quite a few galaxies that reach five times that rate; so we know there *was* intelligent life there."

Janaki plunged, by dead reckoning, into a new passage in the far corner of the plaza.

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The closer he neared the area he figured to enclose Central Control, the fewer sentients were in evidence, which suited him just fine. The tension of waiting to be recognized as a sentient, rather than a mechanical porter or messenger, or even as a human, was beginning to wear at him. It didn't help that he had no idea if being caught off-limits was punishable by a spanking or by annihilation.

The Cirtassian xenogeneticist's offices were at the top of a pillar standing above Uzoechi Square, and from where she sat in the reception room Jenoatha could see the Square's further reaches. Through the bazaar moved clusters of sentients, elongated, silky, gliding, absorbed, at home.

The Cirtassian stood on the other side of the transparent wall separating Jenoatha from its fluorine quarters. Its precariously-staggered thin struts and metallic-seeming joints resembled nothing more than an old-fashioned photographic tripod. But it was said to be one of the most efficient craftsmen in the trade.

"I want to bear a child," said Jenoatha. This creature was so different from humanity that she felt no unease in discussing her problem with it.

"My dear lady," the geneticist's amplified voice emerged through the wall speaker, "then I suppose you should."

Jenoatha thought a moment. "But there are *problems*," she ventured at last.

The geneticist scratched a tripod limb with something else. "Could you be more explicit?"

"I am sure you are aware of the conditions under which we humans live, sir," she said. "The restrictions and so on?"

"I do," replied the Other. "But I do not blame you for that."

"Thank you," Jenoatha said, with real gratitude. "That is refreshing. But you must understand my feelings at the thought of bringing a child into existence in such circumstances. It seems . . . unthoughtful to say the least."

"I empathize, dear lady. You have a normal desire for reproduction, but find it hard to accept bringing a child into the existence it would be forced to undergo. Yes?"

"Exactly." She was glad the Other was making it easy for her. Even so, she felt her sinuses clogging. "I wondered whether, with your knowledge of the genetic structures of *so* many sentients, it would be possible to arrange for . . . for a . . ."

"For a half-breed," said the Cirtassian easily. "Quite possible."

"Then I think I want to apply," said Jenoatha, and broke into

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tears. The Other punched a console, probably seeking the signification of such effusions among Earthings, and seemed distraught at what it found.

"My dear lady," it said at last. "I believe I should respond at this point by flinging an appendage around your upper extremity and exerting a not-excessive pressure while enunciating, 'There, there, dear lady; it will be all right'; but I find myself on the wrong side of the partition."

"That's all right," managed Jenoatha, drying her eyes on her cuff. "It's all over now."

"Fine," said the Other in relief. "Can you continue?"

"Of course. Well, what I really need to know is; first, if a germ mixture with some other species *is* possible. And then, just how *close* to normal humanity the offspring can be made, and still be exempt from the human restrictive rules."

"Just a few moments, my dear lady. I must research this." It bent to its console. Jenoatha let her eyes rove to the window. Far off she saw a slew of young Barians at play in the game fields, playing tag after each other's tails over, around, and under a elderly sleeping Parikh. The Barian imagoes watched fretfully from the edge of the field, proud and worried as ever.

"Dear, this is more complex than I had believed," the voice of the Cirtassian broke into her musings. "I had no idea. Anyway, as for your first query, the procedure is quite possible. We are able to manipulate the plasm of a wide range of sentients, including your own species, with double or larger-multiple mixes. Indeed, the difficulty would seem to be to choose from a superabundance of riches. Within extensive limits, we can brew what you wish. May I ask if you expected an actual mating, or would you be satisfied with an outside-the-body mix?"

Jenoatha gasped. "Good heavens! Outside the body, *please*."

"Very good. The alternative would, in some cases, be conceivable, but would sharply limit our potential donors. Now as to the second query. Physically, there is no difficulty. The human restrictions are not predicated upon any element of your species's physiological makeup. So your child can be utterly human in all outward appearance, although if you desire to integrate any form of appendages, or utilitarian or decorative attributes, it should not be difficult to provide."

"Thank God!" said Jenoatha. "I was praying it would be possible to do this without Omar knowing."

"But the mental, or, if I may say so, the more spiritual charac-

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teristics of the child," continued the geneticist, "are more restricted. Let me show you." It twiggled a toggle, and a schematic drawing appeared on the wall. "This shows the human genetic pattern. Now the restrictions on human activity relate to these structures marked in green. If we can remove or modify such sufficiently, your offspring will be an unrestricted citizen of the Galaxy; though of course, as a unique, he or she will only be able to reproduce through similar matching techniques."

"I understand."

"Now there is the complication that many of these genes are linked. For instance, my dear lady, this point, which represents an element in so-called aggressive tendencies, is closely linked with this one, which has to do with curiosity, and that one, which deals with interior calcium structures. In short, your child might be stolid and boneless. However, by selecting donors carefully, suitable substitute structures and qualities should be available from non-human sources. And so on. If you are still interested, we can develop a preliminary profile of your child at our next session."

"I'd *like* that."

As Jenoatha turned to go, the Other called her back.

"One other thing," it said, shuffling oddly on its tripod. "I do hope you realize that, as a citizen of the galaxy in good standing, and all that . . ."

"Yes?"

"Your child will not be able to live together with *you*."

Between Uzoechi Square and Manplace, three sentients informed her that it was less than 1500 light years to Sol.

Janaki figured himself to be a few kilometers from the Control Center. He rounded another curve in the dim corridor and stopped short.

Several meters ahead of him down the corridor squatted a very human-like form. Its human-like face swung in his direction. It regarded him fixedly.

It wasn't marked sentient.

"Hello," said Janaki.

It didn't reply, but rose to its feet and moved slowly towards him. It was about his height, but hairy; and it moved slouchingly. Something deep in Janaki's gut rang alarm.

It paused just in front of him, eyeing him expressionlessly.

"Are you human?" asked Janaki.

It raised one arm slowly, then swiftly shot it out; and with a shock

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Janaki felt sharp talons rake his cheek. He stepped back quickly, raised his right hand to his face, stared at the blood on his palm. He stared at the thing. It moved another step in his direction, closing the gap. Janaki stepped back.

"Hey, what's that about? You've got no call to . . ."

It took another step. Janaki backed away rapidly.

"You stay away from me, you hear? Just stay away from me."

It continued to advance, clawed hand raising slowly: Janaki swung out wildly. The hand descended with an impact that struck Janaki to his knee.

Janaki looked up at the thing. Its face wore a grimace that chilled him. Janaki felt a warm trickle of liquid running down his shoulder under his shredded jumper.

He rose and fled. And it came after him.

Before he had taken three steps he felt it smash into his back, four limbs wrapped around him, and teeth raked the back of his neck as he fell. The two rolled over in a tangle of flailing limbs and smashed solidly into a bulkhead. One of Janaki's hands was grasping some hairy handful of the creature's body, and he twisted and tore at it in panic.

The thing was on top of him, and holding him pinioned. Its red eyes gleamed down in evil glee. Its mouth bared, showing needled fangs. From a corner of its mouth, blood oozed: Janaki's blood. It paused to gulp down a morsel of flesh: Janaki's flesh. Its grip tightened, claws piercing his arms.

Janaki screamed; and an instant after, like an echo, the thing on top of him screamed. Its head jerked back, and a flowing shadow seemed to engulf its distorted features. The taloned hands released Janaki and darted to its face, tearing at the blackness now spreading downwards over its head. Its continuing screams came muffled now. It was pulled backwards from off Janaki's body, drawn bumpingly across his legs.

Janaki sat up, his head swimming. He stared into the dimness.

Whatever had the thing was still sucking it in. From the tubular end the creature's legs kicked spasmodically. The whatever had no spots. It was, in fact, a cleaning hose.

Janaki sucked in his breath with short rasping sobs. He'd never expected to be *grateful* to one of those things.

And then with horror he saw that the hose, having disposed of his attacker, was creeping towards *him*!

With sudden realization, even as he retched, Janaki tore franti-

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cally with his fingers at the plastic film on his forehead.

Omar sat unmoving, summoning up all his patience. His skin itched from the unpleasant atmosphere in the Balite's close compartment, and he was constantly aware of the time rushing on towards curfew. But there was no hastening a Balite; he knew that much of them already.

The stocky being across the room from him remained frozen in an immobility that might be sleep, or trance, or even death. The bronze carapace that wove over its body like a gutted honeycomb caught highlights from the glowing arc lights set in the ceiling; in places through the web the dull vermilion of its internal body was visible.

Abruptly its mouth opened, unnervingly, in its forehead.

"We will be unable to help you," it said, "unless you make your wishes explicit." The lipless gash closed, and it resumed its silent stance.

This was the crux, then. There would be no feeling out, no prudent caution until a feel for mutual understanding had been laid. Omar must lay it all out now . . . and if he had guessed wrong, the outcome would be swift and unpleasant. But he had planned too long, hoped too much for this; there was no turning back.

Omar opened his mouth (*unnervingly, thought the Balite, in his chin*) and replied, "I hate the Others. All men hate them. And so do you." He waited. No encouragement or reproach. He continued of necessity. "It may take centuries, but we mean to be a free people again. And that means revolt. Man will take up an independent role in galactic affairs again. And we think you may be willing to help."

Pause. Omar rubbed his neck uneasily.

The Balite's mouth-slit pulsed again. "Why should we help? You know the rules concerning your species, the detestation in which you are held."

Omar leaned forward. "We have heard much of your race. You also have had your difficulties with the Others. You are the only ones we know of, besides ourselves, who refer to them as Others. You also, at a period before Man's own emergence into the Galaxy, wished to go your own way. You built your own ships, founded your own colonies, desired only to possess your own little worlds and be left alone. And the Others would not let you."

"So you think us like you." There *is* such a thing as alien scorn.

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"We troubled no one. We did not desire to control and manipulate, like you Earthings. We merely wanted to trade as independents, to keep our own ways."

"We know you do not like us humans either," said Omar. "But we are hoping that your dislike of your present situation is even more intense. Together we can do much, where alone we are both as nothing."

Silence. Then, "What exactly do you propose?"

"Cooperation. Secret preparation for a time when we can *take* our independence. We humans are scattered across the Galaxy in tiny groups, kept in ignorance of much even you Balites know; we can not go places or hold positions which your people can. But in turn, we humans have skills and abilities you do not possess. We can . . ."

"You can lie, you can steal, you can kill," said the Balite evenly. "We know you Earthings by reputation."

There was no use arguing the point. It was irrelevant. Omar reached for the main point.

"*Will* you help? For your own reasons, whatever they are?"

The Balite said "Yes."

Omar sat back and wiped the sweat from his brow.

The Balite said "If."

"If?" Omar leaned forward again.

"I have communicated with the rest of my people," said the Balite. "This is the answer to your request. We Balites must be in total control. We do not trust you Earthings, and we have much reason. We will prepare with you, over the long term, for eventual revolt, as long as you Earthings follow our every order. You must do what we say, when we say it, as we tell you to, and with no questions. As long as you follow us thus, we will help you. Whenever you refuse to obey, we will leave you to the Others."

Omar stood up. "In short, you want us to become your slaves."

"The term used is unimportant," said the Balite. "Return with your reply tomorrow. I am also instructed to inform you that we are now 1450 light years from Sol."

Omar strode from the room, leaving the Other stolidly frozen in its place.

The tall sentient stood over Janaki, looking down at him dispassionately. The sound of the dismissed cleaning hose slithered away into the distance and vanished. The dim corridor was stilled.

The being above him was smooth and beautiful. Six limbs flowed

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gracefully into a columnar trunk, topped by a triangular face, a ruddy complexion spotted with white identity marks . . . Ship's Administration. But humanoid. Almost familiar.

"I am Lokhor CLI Maroth," it said quietly. A pause, as it searched his mind gently. "You are Janaki Skidgell, a human. You should not be here."

It bent and touched Janaki's shoulder softly, then his neck and arm.

"Lie still, Janaki," it said, Then, sounding just like Edma, "This won't hurt at all." It raised an arm to its mouth, and a sticky brown substance began to ooze slowly onto its palm. "This will heal," it said. "It is not really as disgusting as you are thinking."

It applied the salve to Janaki's wounds softly, gently. The waves of pain began to ebb away, leaving Janaki weak. The three-cornered face of the Other bobbed over Janaki's as he worked on the wounds.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Janaki at last.

"Take you back to Manplace, where you belong, of course," said Lokhor. "You should not be here at all. And you were very foolish to cover your identity spots. The danger of being employed as an item of transport, nutrition, or waste disposal by an unwitting sentient is too great to take such chances."

Lokhor helped Janaki to his feet at last. "Come along," he said. "You are going home."

They paced the corridor, turned off onto a sliding ramp that mounted gradually into a swelling light.

"You remind me of my own offspring, Mathod," said Lokhor after a while. "The young of many peoples are alike, I imagine. Mathod has given me and his mothers many creases on our breasts. But somehow it is still worth it."

"What was . . . that awful thing?" asked Janaki. He imaged the ripping face that had torn at him. Lokhor, an obvious telepath, would need no wordy description.

"A thing of the interstices," replied Lokhor. "They seldom appear in the corridors, but we can never get rid of them entirely. You have something in your mind from your own history you might compare them to . . . rats."

"Oh. Then not . . . intelligent."

"They have . . . chosen not to be," said Lokhor. "Forget them. You were not so intelligent yourself this day."

"I only wanted to see the Ship's Control Center."

"You will never see it," said Lokhor.

Janaki stopped and faced Lokhor. "Why can't I? I've heard so

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much about it. I wouldn't hurt or touch anything. I just want to *see* it."

"You will never see it," repeated Lokhor. "Just as," he paused before each phrase, just long enough to let a new desire rise in Janaki's mind, before slapping it down, "just as you will never crew a star ship . . . or land on a planet . . . or make decisions on the fate of your own kind."

The gross enormity of it infuriated Janaki. "Why?" he asked. "*You* can! You *all* can! Why can't we humans?"

"Because," said Lokhor, "you are human."

"That's not fair!" stormed Janaki.

Lokhor regarded him sadly. "What is fair?" he asked. "Have you heard of Aldebaran VII? Was that fair? Do you know the fate of the Marcusii of the Pleiades? Was that fair?"

"I wasn't even alive then," gasped Janaki. "You can't blame *me*."

"We don't *blame* you," said Lokhor, "as an individual or even as a species. But . . . it's not going to happen again."

They emerged from the top of the ramp and walked towards the tubes visible across the open fields of azure scrub, and as they walked Lokhor held his hand, and described in full detail the fabulous wonders of Central Control.

Almost all the pods had detatched from the ship, and still Edma could not bring herself to address any sentient. It seemed clear she would again miss Service.

The last stumpy quadruped shuffled past her down the entry ramp and entered the last pod. Edma turned and started back towards Manplace. There was a scuffling behind her, and she looked back to see the rump of the Other appear, clumsily backing out of the pod. When the head appeared, it turned in her direction and addressed her.

"Did you wish to attend Service?" it inquired.

Not trusting herself to speak, she raised her arm affirmatively.

"Come along then," it said briefly.

It likely didn't know her for a human then. Edma joined it in the pod. It punched up furniture for itself and then, after scrutinizing Edma's form, for her as well. She sank onto it in relief. Actually it wasn't very comfortable, but she wasn't about to complain.

"Glolo," the sentient introduced itself. "Of Halkayn." It was manipulating controls with a prehensile lip. "You nearly missed Service."

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"Edma," she responded. And paused. If Glolo didn't know humans by sight, why enlighten it? "I know," she said briefly.

"I hope this is comfortable for you," asked Glolo. "Less oxygen, if you wish it, but I wouldn't want any *more*. Lighting? Heat?" and it bustled about until a suitable compromise was found. "Let's go, then."

Glolo punched the release switch, and the pod broke loose from the Ship, and drifted out from the wall. Edma held her breath. It was her first time out.

Stretching away around them were the walls and bays and attachments and projections of the ship, all sense of the Ship's form lost in kilometers of endless ad hoc detail. Ahead of them beyond the transparent skin of their pod lay a thick swash of suns and the hundreds of tiny lighted bubbles that had set out before them.

Glolo remained busy at the controls until they had cleared the last trailing buttress of the Ship, and the pod had been aimed for the place of Congregation. Then it turned to her.

"Your first Service, I imagine?"

"Why, yes sir, it is."

"I thought so. A certain intense excitement was evident. Believe me, the pleasure of Service never palls, but the first time, you will never forget."

Edma looked ahead to where thousands of life pods were gathering at Congregation from all parts of the Ship. Shortly ahead of them drifted one globe glowing softly pink in the blackness, where liquid-immersed forms wavered and bobbed indistinctly.

"It *is* wonderful for me," she admitted slowly. "All these sentients . . ." she took a deep breath, and dared the pronoun, "all of *us* together as one in Worship."

Glolo chittered softly. "Exactly," it said. "All have a place."

Edma sat watching the approaching cluster of globes in the emptiness of space and waiting for Glolo to ask her origin, but it didn't.

Then Service began.

Hours later, as the pod returned and the vast bulk of the ship expanded before them, obscuring the star clouds, Edma sat silently sobbing. Glolo, who likely didn't know the difference between a human's sob, snore, or sneeze, handled the controls rapidly, guiding them in through the maze around the pod ports.

When they docked she sat a moment longer, drying her eyes.

"Thank you very much, Glolo," she said. "That meant so much to

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me."

"But it was no trouble," said Glolo. "It was a pleasure to have your companionship."

She rose. "I must be leaving now."

"Think on what you have experienced," said the Halkayn. "All of us, one . . . in Worship."

"I shall," she said, and turned to go.

"By the way," came Glolo's voice, "it is now 1200 light years to Sol."

Edma turned in agonized shame. "You knew," she gasped. "All the time, you knew what I was."

"I knew," said the Other. "And it doesn't matter."

"But . . ." she felt her cheeks burn. "But I am human."

"But you experienced Service. Your species has a very central place in Worship, does it not?"

Edma gulped. "And what a place! We are . . . Cain, Judas."

"True," said Glolo, tossing his shaggy head in agreement. "And still the great Meaning includes you. You, in fact, even more than my people, for we are only one of the many, whereas your people are central." It looked at her with what might have been compassion. "You Earthings did not ask to be what you are, Edma, and we who Worship understand that. The Meaning we serve is wide enough to have created you, and we who Worship must try to be deep enough to accept you as That does. It is almost like a test of our faith."

Edma bowed her head in confusion.

Glolo chittered gently. "Besides," it said, "I even feel a sense of closeness, of similarity to you Earthings in some ways."

Startled, she looked up at it.

"For example," Glolo said, "did you realize that your people and mine are two of the rare species possessing what we call a sense of humor?" It winked one eye, turned, and had trotted briskly out of sight before she could even ask, "What's *that*?"

"And the 'rats', Lokhor," asked Janaki. "Where do they come from, originally?"

And Lokhor looked at him a long time, and then said, "You don't really want to know."

The four Earthings stood silently on the observation deck, staring out at the star racks. The stars stared lidlessly back at them, bleak and cold and uncaring. They were silent too. There should have been a lonely whisper of chill wind brushing past the outside of the view-

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port, but there was nothing.

"Winter," thought Omar. "Eternal winter," and thinking that, thought how inadequate it was. Winter was a world term–when a planet tipped temporarily from its primary, that was winter. Here no sun had ever shone, warmth had never come; the idea of warmth could not be grasped. A word was needed; there was none.

"Sol," said the whispery voice from the speakers, "one thousand one light years."

To Omar, looking at that speck of light, lost in the gleaming multitudes, Sol was down below them. For centuries Man had been climbing the heavens, higher and higher, until now he was poised on the pinnacles of space, looking down through endless vastnesses on the firefly gleam from which he had mounted. How easy, he thought, it would seem to glide down from this height, swoop down on outstretched pinions, swiftly darting downwards past the suns and the gas clouds and the dust swarms, to alight once more on the worlds of home, never to leave them again.

Jenoatha saw Sol in her zenith. To her the Millennium had been an endless descent, falling, falling forever through an unheeding universe, ever retreating further down the slope from the beginnings. How simple that past plunge seemed; and how impossible to contemplate ever retreading that upward path, that unending ascent of a thousand light years to where that tiny gleam, among all the other gleams, sparkled in the eternal night. *That is the task,* came to her unbidden, *that the difficulty.*

Janaki looked out upon the stars as an endless plain. He did not look for Sol. That was only one star among many, to be forgotten forever. And probably far from the most interesting. He wished he could spin off among all the stars the way the Others did, rest momentarily on this world, touch on that, and off again. His mind drifted on through the pricelessly complex universe that was denied him. Earth and its memories meant nothing to him.

Edma stared fixedly into the galactic night and saw none of its stars. She saw the Galaxy as a brief and fragmentary swirl, and that in a cosmos equally fragile and limited, and that in something greater for which she had no name but the Meaning. It was all well in the end, and there was a place even for her, a wretched Earthing, as much as for the most noble of the Others. If she must be punished for being what Meaning had made her, that was as nothing to the knowledge that she was part of Meaning.

Osyp Skidgell was not present. Gramps had chosen not to leave Manplace. He had preferred to join himself to the past with his own

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hand than outlive Man's Millennial.

"Sol," whispered the voice, "One thous–"

The speck in the darkness flared. Still dimensionless, it loomed in brilliance a thousand fold, flaming in silent grandeur, the brightest and noblest object in the visible galaxy.

The four humans stood watching for light years while the spark flamed to a peak and then died away to invisibility. They remained standing long after it was no longer visible.

"Sol, 995 light years," said the alien voice. "Return to Manplace. It is time to sleep."

Bracg was propped against the passage wall outside of Manplace, waiting for the returning Earthings. He silently opened the gate and let them pass in. As Janaki started to enter Bracg reached out and stopped him.

"A message arrived for you a short time ago," he said. "You are to play it in private." He slouched back to Granghome.

Janaki stood in the center of the corridor, oblivious to the passing sentients, and tossed the message disc from hand to hand. Finally he pressed it to his ear and palmed the trigger.

"Private communication to Janaki Skidgell, human, from Lokhor CLII Mathod," said a soft voice. "The twelfth anniversary of my hatching is to be celebrated next fifthday at 56:60 on Deck 71, Left 8000-2, Up 70. My father has told me much of you, and I look forward to making your acquaintance. Festivities will include monitored shaft diving, a tour of the Growth Facilities and the Central Control Rooms, and a exhibition of Core Star Art forms. Please respond if you can attend. Please come."

Janaki stood a long time in the corridor staring down at the disc in his hand. Then he slipped it into his pocket, and walked through the still open gateway into Manplace.

There was still Gramps's wake to get through, and for a while Manplace would be more depressing even than usual. But he could put up with it for a while. Janaki knew he wouldn't have to live there forever.

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TITLE FIND

by Susan Casper

Hidden in the square below are the titles of 38 science fiction novels and stories. The titles may be written forwards, backwards, up, down, or diagonally. It is usually a good idea to circle the titles as you find them, and to make up a list. The word "the" at the beginning of a title is always omitted. The title list may be found on page 127, the complete solution on page 137.

D U N E S T N A H C R E M E C A P S
T E R Y V A D D L R O W T S O L T T
B A M T E N A L P G I B N J A R C J
T O B O R D U O R P O E E N H O A C
R E N I L E F I L O V L E R T G T O
E O O B R I F I T A W T E P R U N L
L A R R A T S A E O O G H M I E O D
L E R R T O N H R F S T N U B M C E
E M A N O E S T E L L E N I E O T Q
T O B O R I T X T D U O R P R O S U
S N K A S T I P S U M B E V O N R A
F A C R S L O J A G U A I D E N I T
R B A T E O A M M I U S N K Y M F I
A M J O V V V N T W I L I G H T A O
D A G D R E O P S L L A F T H G I N
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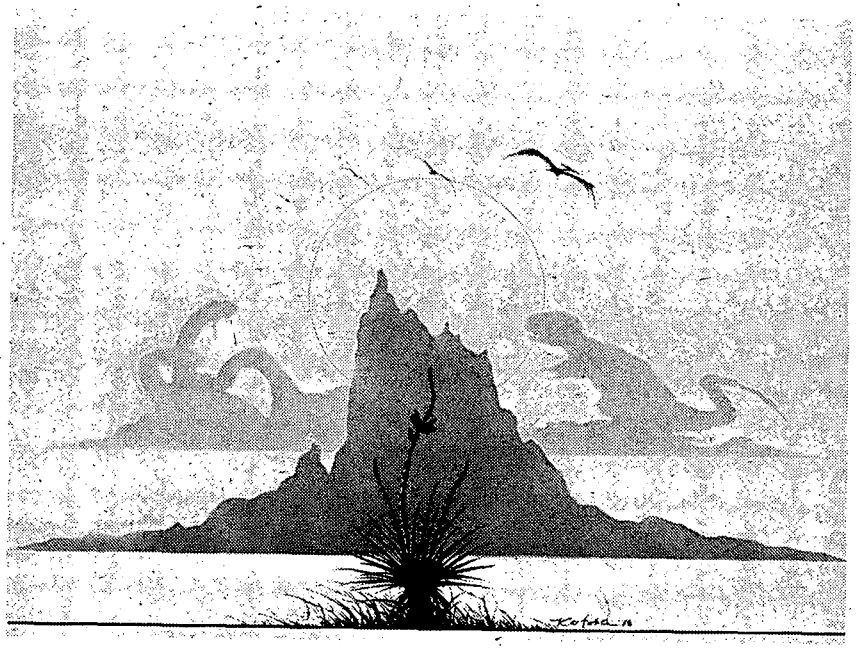
AFTERNOON FOR PHANTOMS



It is an afternoon for phantoms:
no wind, no clouds, the air so clear and still
that you can almost see all the way down to Mexico,
five, six hundred miles to the south,
and hot enough to melt asphalt, cook brains in crania,
cook the salty marrow cores of bones,
cook the ghosts beneath the ground, within the sandstone.
It is an afternoon for phantoms:
fish-lizard and pterosaur, trachodon and thunder-lizard
surface gasping for breath (their first in eighty-million years),
and then that lordly pair, *Tyrannosaurus rex* and *regina*,
at last bestir themselves,
rise up, emerge to see what their subjects are up to
after all these years.

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The King and the Queen, the fabled engines of appetite,
sniff in momentary perplexity, then lurch across the landscape
on hindlegs as huge and rough as the boles of oaks.
And when at last they chance upon the current lord of creation,
who stands alone and enthralled by some nameless Texas road,
dreaming in the afternoon's heat and glare,
they pause, peer, and pass, laughing (their laughter—
appropriately enough—like blasts of steam
from ancient dinosaurian locomotives),
and get on with their longawaited vacation
from extinction.

—S. Dale

ANSWER TO PROFESSOR CRACKER'S ANTITELEPHONE (from page 26)

Here is how Ada Loveface proved that if tachyons exist they can't be used for sending signals with speeds faster than light:

Suppose that *A*, at Barkback College, is in communication by a tachyonic antitelephone with *B*, who lives on a planet at the other side of our Galaxy. The tachyon speeds and the distance are such that if *A* sends a signal to *B*, and *B* instantly replies, then *B*'s signal will arrive one hour before *A* sends his signal. *A* could then get an answer to a question an hour before he asked it!

Dr. Loveface sharpened the contradiction as follows. Suppose *A* and *B* agree that *A* will ask his question at noon if and only if *B*'s immediate reply does *not* reach him by 11 A.M. on the same day. We are forced to conclude that an exchange of messages will take place if and only if it does not take place—a flat logical contradiction.

A few days after Professor Cracker had abandoned his project, Ada approached him and said: "Perhaps I was too hasty the other day in saying your antitelephone couldn't work. I've been reading some old science fiction classics about time travel, and they have suggested a possible way a modulated tachyon beam *could* send a signal that wouldn't lead to an absurdity."

To find out what Dr. Loveface has in mind, turn to page 126.

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MY SISTER'S EYES

by Juleen Brantingham

art: Alex Schomburg

"Identical" isn't quite the right word to describe twins. . . .

Rina always had much more imagination than I. No, that's not the right way to put it. We're identical twins, after all.

Rina lived in her imagination more than I did. Once, when we were twelve, I told her a ghost story I'd heard from a friend at school. For weeks after that, Rina would become pale and shaky at sunset.

If a thing existed in her mind, it was real for Rina. Perhaps that's why she was so timid. In any situation, Rina could imagine the

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worst. If I hadn't been there to hold her hand, Rina would never have dared to go to school, join the Girl Scouts, go out on a date, or get a job. The hand-holding became less literal as we grew up, but never less necessary.

I stood beside the bed with the built-in plumbing and wiring, and I wondered where my sister's mind had gone, how she was faring alone for the first time in her life.

The man in the white coat put his hand on my arm. "Ms. Lyons," he said.

"Yes, doctor."

"About the procedure."

"That was my answer, Doctor. Yes, I'll do it. Rina needs my help. I've never refused to give it to her before. I never could."

"Perhaps you should take more time to think it over. Talk to your friends and your family doctor. It *is* experimental."

I turned away from the bed, from the still ruin that had been my twin sister. "Now you sound as if you don't want me to go through with it. Why did you tell me about it in the first place if you didn't want me to try it?"

His soft, round face turned slightly pink. He couldn't be a doctor. He couldn't possibly have graduated from high school yet. Who was it who told me it was a sure sign of advancing age when doctors and cops all looked like babies?

"I want to be sure you understand the risks," he said. "We have had some success under controlled conditions, especially with identical twins. But we've never before tried it with a subject in such a deep coma."

"You want to be sure I won't sue if something goes wrong. All right. Give me a form and I'll sign it. Let's get on with this."

"There are preparations, tests to be made," he said in a voice much older than his face. "I will get back to you in a few hours."

I had offended him. He was as stiff as a frozen turkey as he strutted out of the room, clutching his dignity and his clipboard.

All right, I'd offended him. It wasn't the first time I'd offended someone because I wouldn't waste time with social lies. What did that damn, silly boy matter anyway. I rubbed at the scar on my lower lip.

I held Rina's hand and talked to her, searching her face for some sign of returning life. I'd been doing it for weeks now and with every week that passed, the doctors held out less and less hope. The accident had killed Rina's husband and her unborn child, and I believed that on some deep level, she knew that. She had retreated

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from something she couldn't bear to face. *That* was what held her locked in this coma. It was *not* her injuries, doctors be damned.

I talked to Rina about the weather and what I was wearing and the song I'd heard on the radio this morning and my job—wondering without much concern if I still had one. I hadn't been to my office since the police brought me news of Rina's accident. I wouldn't go back until this thing was settled, one way or another.

No! I had to stop thinking things like that. I would go back when Rina came out of her coma. All she needed was a little help, someone to hold her hand. The procedure that new doctor talked about, that was the answer. I'd go after her, follow her to wherever she was hiding and coax her to return. The job didn't matter. Nothing else in my life mattered very much when my sister needed me.

I had helped her so many times before.

"Reba, you'll never guess what's happened!" She burst into my office, radiating sparks and heat and giggles. I felt a moment of empathy with my supervisor for the last time I'd rushed to his office with some good news. He'd crouched behind his desk in shock and that's exactly what I felt like doing to avoid being singed by Rina's enthusiasm.

"I've met the most wonderful man!"

As soon as I heard those words I withdrew behind my plastic smile and considered her. Of course it had to be a romance that did this to Rina. She was bright; she had talents she'd barely explored, opportunities she'd ignored. The only thing that brought Rina out from behind the wall she'd built around her fears and insecurity was a new love affair. I'd already saved her from a dozen bad ones and she was only thirty-two.

I would not do it this time, dammit.

The decision surprised me. This guy sounded like even more of a jerk than the rest. He'd never finished high school. He drove a delivery van. She showed me his picture and he looked Neanderthal. He would probably beat her and expect her to stay home and raise lots of babies.

I would not do it this time. I would not hang around waiting for the inevitable disappointment, waiting to patch her up and build up her confidence again when he hurt her. I was tired of beating my head against that wall. Rina seemed determined to dive into disaster. This time she'd just have to pull herself out of it.

The sparkle dimmed a little. Had she sensed something on the twin link?

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"What's the matter, Reba? I thought you'd be happy for me."

I reached across the desk to take her hand. "I *am*," I said. "I was just thinking, it looks like Jim and I are finally going to make it legal. We might wind up having that double wedding Mama always wanted."

The sparkle dimmed a little more. Was it grief because Mama and Dad weren't here to see that wedding? Or something else?

I took her to lunch to celebrate and she regained her sparkle. One of the guys I work with mistook Rina for me and he sat down beside her to discuss a scheduling problem. I had one more drink than I should have and was fuzzy all afternoon.

We didn't have that double wedding. Jim and I started to disagree about everything from how to cook eggs to whose turn it was to clean the bathroom. He moved out and Rina made me wear pink as her maid of honor.

The morning of the wedding I went over to her apartment to help her get ready. She was dressed in a pair of tattered jeans, going through a box of junk on her bedroom floor. There were tears in her eyes.

"Rina, what's wrong? Did you and Mac have a fight? It's not too late. We can still call this off."

She looked up at me and laughed. "No, don't be silly. Look, do you remember the Lyin' twins?" She held out a pair of dolls to me. They were identical except one of them had a deep scratch on its lower lip. Rina had done that with a paring knife the day I had my stitches taken out.

"I remember," I said. "Mama was determined that we have everything exactly alike so one of us wouldn't feel cheated." I tossed the dolls on the bed. "Why do you clutter up your life with this stuff?"

"One of us has to remember," she said, turning back to the box.

"You still haven't told me why you were crying," I said.

"Just—things," she said. "It's all changing finally, isn't it? You started school first because I had whooping cough. You went to camp first. You had the first date and the first engagement ring. Isn't it funny?" She looked up at me and I didn't think the hard shine in her eyes was from laughter. "I'm finally doing something before you."

I laughed. It sounded a little shaky. "Look at it another way. You were the first to break your leg, the first to have an abortion, the first to see a psychiatrist."

I hadn't known I could be so cruel. Dammit, I was *scared*. All these years she'd refused to listen, refused to *do* something with her

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life as I had done. She was going away from me, where I couldn't reach her.

"Doesn't count," she said, shrugging. "You never did any of those things. *This* counts. For once in my life I'm not just a copy of Reba Lyons."

The wedding champagne didn't wash away the sour taste in my mouth.

The baby doctor loomed over me. "It's not too late. We can still call this off."

The one time in my life I'd let my sister down. I'd let her try something on her own. Look how she was paying for it now.

"No," I said, closing my eyes, already drifting. "I want to help her. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try."

There were more instructions, more explanations, needles, a hypnotic voice. I took what I needed and shut out the rest. Rina couldn't have done it that way. She would have listened to all the cautions and been paralyzed by them. Thank God it was Rina in that bed with built-ins and not me, or there would have been no hope for either of us.

Now what did I mean by that, I wondered fuzzily. It must have been the drugs.

Couldn't live by myself. Poor Rina. She was so alone and afraid. Poor, poor sister.

"Reach out to her," the voice instructed. "Where would she go? Follow her. Call to her. Tell her to take your hand and help you across."

His words were turning to letters of blue ice—blue eyes—blue ice and Rina's dead hand was cold in mine. But that was not the hand I was reaching for. Sweaty, chubby hands with broken fingernails.

It was the strangest dream. Just flashes. Cold, white walls and a hard bed under me. Somehow I knew it was a hospital bed. But why was I dreaming of that when I *knew* I was standing in the sun? I could feel it burning my forehead and the tip of my nose, the places that always flaked and oozed when we came back from our vacations at the beach.

No, it was *this* that was the dream, the other real. But the sun was hot on my closed eyelids and Rina's hand was loose in mine and I could feel sweat trickling between our palms.

She didn't want to touch me, I knew that from the twin link that Daddy always teased us about. She wanted to be free—to run across the grass to the jungle gym.

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We were in the playground at the end of the street. Nobody ever goes there. Kids our age are all over at the school yard, playing basketball. The little kids have better swing sets in their back yards.

Nobody comes here. They don't even keep the grass mowed, and Mama says there might be snakes. But Rina likes it because the other kids stay away, and Daddy says it's only fair that we do what Rina wants some of the time.

Wouldn't Rina scream if she saw a snake? She's such a baby. She's not like me, even if we do look alike. Daddy says I'm not afraid of anything. I heard him tell a neighbor, "Nothing scares Reba. Why, she'd probably tackle a bear, especially if it was threatening Rina. She'd do anything for her sister."

I think that part came later. But it's hard to remember. The sun is so hot. I want to be somewhere else, somewhere cool—somewhere—I don't want to open my eyes. I'm afraid. There's something in the playground—

Rina tugged at my hand. "Come *on*! Let's race to the top of the jungle gym!"

Her words remind me of cold walls and hospital beds and I open my eyes. The colors make me wince. So bright. And the smells—grass and hot metal and sweat and the soap Mama uses on our tee shirts. I have to remember letters of blue ice.

"Rina, we have to talk," I said. "You can't stay here."

It is too soon. With a jerk she is away from me, running across grass that couldn't possibly be so green. She seems to shrink, as if she's running the wrong way down a telescope. I close my eyes and the slipping begins.

"—eba Lyons. You are at St. John's Hospital and I am Doctor—"

"Yes, I know all that," I say impatiently, opening my eyes. The baby doctor looks as if he's about to turn cartwheels. How can he be happy when Rina hasn't moved and I feel as if I've just dropped twenty stories in a fast elevator? My lip was burning.

"You reached her, didn't you?" he demanded.

"Yes, I reached her. But it didn't do any good. This isn't going to work. I couldn't bring her back with me."

He shook his head and unfastened something from my arm, helped me sit up. "We didn't expect you could the first time. Most of our subjects don't even make contact that quickly. Now you know where she is, how to get there."

"Where she is? She's right there in that bed!" Hysteria edged my voice but he didn't seem to notice.

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"I was speaking figuratively, of course. This sanctuary she's built for herself, I'd be willing to bet you recognized it. It's the memory of a place she knows well, a place where she was happy and safe."

Safe? I shuddered. The fool was wrong, how could his procedure be right? It wasn't safe at all. Why, look what had happened.

I rubbed at the scar on my lower lip. With all the tension of the last few weeks, it was becoming red and puffy. Just this morning I'd noticed a tiny spot had opened up and begun to seep.

It had started out as a joke. I was sick of that dumb playground and the stupid jungle gym. I wanted to go and play basketball with the other kids. But they laughed at Rina because she was such a baby, always dragging that wagon along, full of dolls and toy bears. Always crying just because the kids didn't want her on their teams.

Daddy made me take her to the playground. He was mad at me about something. It's not *my* fault the other kids don't like her! It's not *my* fault she's such a baby!

Everybody says we're just alike. They don't know what they're talking about. I'm not like Rina. She's a baby.

It was just a little joke. I was on top of the jungle gym and Rina was walking over to the swings.

"Watch out, Rina, there's a snake! Right there, by your feet!"

It was just a joke. I didn't know she'd believe me. She screamed and screamed. Nobody had ever screamed so loud and it wasn't just in my ears but inside my head—

I tried to stuff my fingers in my ears to block out the sound but I forgot I was on top of the jungle gym and I slipped and fell. All the way to the ground. Flat on my stomach and all my breath went out in a whoosh. I thought I was dead. I waited for Rina to stop screaming and turn around and see me dead.

Then the blood began to trickle down my chin, hot and sticky. I didn't think it was real at first. I looked at it, sliding down the blades of grass, puddling in the dust.

It couldn't be *my* blood. Why, Rina is the one who always gets hurt. It's not fair!

When I got my breath back, I began to scream. Rina whirled around, I guess she forgot about the snake. She dumped all her dolls out of the wagon and helped me get in. Then she pulled me home, running all the way. She didn't even cry, like she usually does when she's scared.

Mama put a cold washcloth on my lip and drove me to the doctor's office. I was still crying. It hurt! It hurt! And all that red blood coming out—mine—was I going to die?

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"Rina, hush. We'll be there soon," Mama said. "Why do you always make such a fuss? It's just a little cut. Why can't you be more like your sister?"

But, Mama, I am Reba.

The sight of that doctor's face was beginning to make me ill. He was so damn happy. He would probably write a paper, win a prize, become famous. He was riding on my back. *I* was doing all the work. *I* was taking all the risk.

But I was doing it for Rina. I had to remember that. I'd always looked after Rina, taken care of her. Daddy said I had to because she was my sister and she was scared of things. I couldn't let her down. I couldn't live with myself—

"Now, Reba, you know where your sister is. Just relax, float, reach out for her."

Just relax. *He* didn't know. It was hard. She was in that place, that awful place with the colors and the smells and the hot sun—

I was slipping again and it made me sick to my stomach, just like that day Rina pulled me in the wagon. She went so fast and she hit all the bumps. I think she did it just to hurt me. Some of the blood was going into my mouth and I wanted to throw up.

But that day came later. What was it? Blue ice—eyes.

She tugged at my hand. "Are you going to stand there all day? Come *on*. Let's go play on the jungle gym."

"I don't *want* to play on the jungle gym."

"Daddy said you *had* to—"

"No, he didn't. He just said I had to come with you. Let's go play on the swings. I'll push you and make you go real high, so high you can see our house."

"I don't like it when you push me," Rina said. "Sometimes you push me crooked and I almost go into the pole. I'll push you instead."

"Okay."

We started to run across that grass that was the wrong shade of green and I had to remember not to talk about snakes. Rina was afraid of snakes and Daddy said I talked about them just to make her cry.

But there was something I *had* to say to her. Not about snakes. What was it?

"Rina, we have to talk."

She looked back at me and the sun was too bright. It made her teeth look long, like a dog's teeth, like that dog that used to bark at us on the way to school, only now Rina won't go that way any

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more 'cause she's scared. She's such a baby.

"After we play on the swings we'll climb to the top of the jungle gym and then we'll talk," she said.

Why did she like it here so much? It was a lot more fun over in the schoolyard with the other kids.

She pushed me on the swing. I made her push me higher and higher until I could amost see the top of our house. I don't know why Rina doesn't like to go that high. If you hold on tight there's nothing to be scared of. And I always hold on tight. Sometimes after we go home and have supper and after we have a bath, the marks of the chains are still on my hands.

She stopped pushing me and ran away. She ran to the jungle gym.

"Let's not do that, Rina. Let's go down the slide instead."

"You're just scared," she said, climbing so fast she hardly seemed to touch the bars.

"I am *not* scared," I yelled. "I'm not scared of anything." Just to show her I waited till the swing was all the way up and then I jumped. She didn't even look! She was *supposed* to look at me. She was just being mean.

"Come on, Rina. Come down here and talk to me."

She leaned way out over the edge. "If you wanna talk you gotta come up here."

"No, Rina, listen. You can't stay here."

She sat up, sat cross-legged on the bars. She stuffed her fingers in her ears and closed her eyes. "Come up here if you wanna talk." Then she stuck her tongue out at me.

My hands were all sweaty. I wiped them on my shorts but they just got sweaty again. Why did she like that dumb old jungle gym so much? Why did we always have to do what *she* wanted to do?

I had to talk to her. It was something important, something about blue ice. No, that couldn't be right. Blue eyes and a hospital bed. Something about that.

I reached out for one of the bars and it was so hot it burned me. I jerked my hand away. Everything was getting all blurry because of the tears in my eyes. Rina wasn't looking. She wasn't even looking.

All the bars were hot, really hot. My hands were so sweaty I kept slipping and I was afraid I'd fall, but Rina just sat there with her eyes closed and her fingers stuffed in her ears. The jungle gym got taller. Every time I took one step it grew two more.

Then my sneakers slipped off a bar. I was hanging there just by my hands.

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"Rina! Rina, help me! I'm going to fall!"

She crawled to me over the top of the gym. "Oh, Reba, you're such a baby. Why can't you be more like your sister?" She gave me her hand and pretty soon I was sitting on top, too. But I had to hold on with both hands. The ground was so far away.

"What did you wanna talk about?"

The ground slanted, like the gym was about to topple. I held on tighter. "We have to go home. It's going to get dark soon. We can't stay here forever."

"All right," she said. "I was getting tired of this anyway. Come on." She started to climb down the side. Swing, swing, swing. There was always a bar, just there, under her hand or foot, exactly when she needed it.

"Rina, wait!"

"What's wrong? You said you wanted to go home." She looked up at me, her hands on her hips. The jungle gym had grown so tall that Rina looked no bigger than one of the Lyin' twins.

"You have to help me. I can't get down by myself."

She walked away. "If you're such a baby you can stay here all night. I'm going home. I've got things to do. Things *you've* never done before."

"Rina, wait! You've got to help me. We're sisters!"

"No, we're not." Her voice drifted back to me. She was already very far away. With every step she took, the sun dropped lower in the sky and the air became more chill. "I'm a real person and you're just a copy of me. I don't need you. I can be myself, all *by* myself."

I couldn't see Rina on the edge of the playground but I knew she had passed it when the sun went down and the moons rose. The air is strange here. It makes the moons look blue, like a pair of eyes watching me. And so cold, they might be made of ice.

My hands were locked around the bars of the jungle gym. I couldn't let go, any more than I'd been able to let go of Rina when the doctors told me it was hopeless. She had always known about this place, had known what it would do to me.

I had known, too, but I could *not* let go. I had always known that Rina could. If I let her.

Rina always lived in her imagination much more than I did. But I don't think she'll be coming back.

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ON THE TINSEL SCREEN: SCIENCE FICTION & THE MOVIES

by James Gunn

art: Alex Schomburg

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This article will become a chapter in a book which Jack Williamson is editing, Science Fiction: Education for Tomorrow, *to be published soon by Owlswick Press.*

Star Wars has delighted tens of millions of film-goers, some of whom have returned to see the film dozens of times; virtually all by itself it has restored Twentieth-Century-Fox to financial health by bringing in the greatest motion picture gross of all time. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* also has brought in a substantial return on its substantial production costs and thrilled audiences with its alien spaceship. New science-fiction films are flooding onto the screen.

All of which suggests that the Western world may be in 1) a golden age of science-fiction films, 2) a golden age of science fiction, or 3) neither. At the World Science Fiction Convention in 1978 in Phoenix, one subject for discussion was whether the vast audiences for the hugely successful science-fiction films were going to mean a great new upsurge in science-fiction readers. Although the only answer to that question lies in the future, editors at the convention such as Frederik Pohl and Ben Bova expressed some skepticism, suggesting that film-goers were not necessarily readers and did not necessarily translate film pleasure into a comparable reading experience. I have made the opposite point to questioners: the success of science fiction in books paved the way for the acceptance of *Star Wars*.

As a matter of fact, printed science fiction and science-fiction film seem to have little to do with each other; and there are virtually no good films that also are good science fiction. *Star Wars* is a simple and charming fairy tale set in scenes in which science-fiction paraphernalia is lying about; and *Close Encounters,* in spite of the splendid epiphany when its Victorian chandelier of a spaceship appears, adds nothing to the concept of encounter with aliens, other than special effects.

The question of why this should be so—why science fiction is

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almost never translated effectively into film—has puzzled several generations of science-fiction readers. The problem with the science-fiction film may be that it adds nothing to science fiction except concreteness of image—and this may be more of a drawback than an asset.

John Baxter, in one of the better books about science-fiction movies, *Science Fiction in the Cinema,* says that science-fiction literature and science-fiction film come from different origins and provide different views of the world. "Science fiction," he says, "supports logic and order, SF film illogic and chaos. Its roots lie not in the visionary literature of the nineteenth century, to which science fiction owes most of its origins, but in older forms and attitudes, the medieval fantasy world, the era of the masque, the morality play, and the Grand Guignol."

Baxter goes on to write that the fund of concepts of science-fiction film is limited. "Those it has fall generally into two categories, the loss of individuality and the threat of knowledge." And he goes on to state, "Probably no line is more common to SF cinema than 'there are some things Man is not meant to know'. . . . It expresses the universal fear all men have of the unknown and the inexplicable, a fear science fiction rejects but which has firmly entrenched itself in the SF cinema."

The result is obvious: if a science-fiction film opens with a scene of a scientist working in a laboratory, the audience knows that what he is working on will come to no good end—it will threaten his neighborhood, his region, his nation, or even the earth itself; it will devour his wife and children and maybe everybody else's wives and children; and he will be sorry, but not as sorry as the rest of us. If the same scene occurs in a science-fiction story, the reader has no preconceptions about how it will come out; the research may turn out badly but it will not be because the scientist should not have done it in the first place, rather because he did it poorly or without proper precautions. And the scientist might be working on research that will be useful, valuable, or indispensable; it may save us all, like the Ark, when danger threatens.

I like Baxter's distinctions, but I find curiously lacking from him a defense of them. Why doesn't (or can't) the science-fiction film reflect written science fiction? Why doesn't (or can't) it support logic and order? Why isn't it (or can't it be) a medium of ideas? Baxter accepts the situation as a given, much as I have heard science-fiction filmmakers surrender to the Hollywood sickness with a shrug and a "you've got to work within the system."

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I would say, first of all, that Baxter's distinctions do not always hold up; on my list of good science-fiction films are several that reflect the values of written science fiction, *Things to Come,* say, or *2001: A Space Odyssey.* Where a science-fiction writer has had a major influence on the development of the film, the result has been better science fiction and a superior film; you can beat the system if you are able to persuade the system of the truth of that statement.

But Baxter is right about most science-fiction films. The people who made them knew nothing about science fiction. When they bought science-fiction stories, they didn't know what they bought; they threw away the best parts and kept the worst, and didn't know the difference. They set out to make what they understood—monster movies, usually, with lots of special effects; but keep the budget low; and if you have to skimp do it on story and acting because nobody will notice.

Take a familiar case in point: John W. Campbell's classic novelette "Who Goes There?"—a suspenseful story about an alien monster discovered frozen in the Antarctic ice by a group of scientists; they thaw it out and it gets loose in their winter camp; it has imitated one or more of the animals and one or more of the men down to their cells and memories; it must be identified by some scientific test which will distinguish man from monster. . . . Hollywood turned it into *The Thing,* about a plant creature from Mars discovered after a flying saucer plunges into the Arctic.

Why must science-fiction films deal only with simple images? Why must filmmakers suffer a failure of imagination when they come to science fiction? These are the questions which bedevil the science-fiction reader. The filmmaker seems content with his ingenious models, his trick photography, his gruesome monsters, and his tabletop destruction.

Most science-fiction films, if translated into written form, would be unpublishable because of lack of logic or originality. I stand behind that statement even in the face of the success of the novelized versions of a variety of recent SF films, including *Star Wars* and its sequels. The ideas in a film such as *THX 1138,* much praised for its visual impact and filmic images, were old in 1949 when George Orwell wove them into a sophisticated novel of ideas, *1984.* Another visually interesting recent film, *Silent Running,* has almost no logic at all: Why put parks into space? Who visits them? What is saved by destroying them?

If a science-fiction reader doesn't find interesting the ideas of a science-fiction film, then all that are left are the images or the

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special effects, which are what you have when you take away the subject matter. Film critics, when they deal with science-fiction films, ignore the ideas and write about images and special effects. And when they discuss ideas they are not to be trusted. I can forgive Susan Sontag for her statement (in "The Imagination of Disaster") that science-fiction films are concerned with the aesthetics of disaster; she is talking about monster and worldwide-destruction movies, not written science-fiction, though she might have pointed out the difference. But I would argue with her conclusion that dealing with disaster in an imaginative way becomes "itself a somewhat questionable act from a moral point of view," by normalizing "what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring us to it." If applicable to science-fiction films, why not to written science fiction? —Here, it seems to me, the fallacy becomes more apparent. The alternative is not to deal fictionally with disaster, perhaps not even to think about it. Ms. Sontag, perhaps, would have us nourish an unspecific horror of things which concern "identity, volition, power, knowledge, happiness, social consensus, guilt, responsibility. . . ."

There is not much difference, as far as inuring goes, in visualizing a horror and writing about it; and I cannot believe that Orwell, to take one example, inured us to the horror of the all-intrusive state by writing *1984;* or that the film, though clearly inferior to the book, made us more likely to accept the conditions it depicts. The difficulty with Ms. Sontag's position is that most persons do not think about consequences until they are faced with them in terms of people's lives. Some—no, all—disasters should be thought through, analyzed, weighed, considered. Some disasters may be inevitable; they must be prepared for. Others are avoidable and must be prevented. Still others offer a choice of alternatives from which one must be chosen as superior to the other. Some are not disasters at all but only seem like disasters. Some may be short-term disasters and long-term boons. Some may be individual disasters and racial necessities.

The basic problem with the science-fiction disaster film is that it imagines disaster but seldom considers alternatives; it stirs our stomachs but seldom our heads. The film critics, accepting what is for what must be, say it can do no other.

We run into this kind of nonsense from film critics. I can forgive Bernard Beck (in "The Overdeveloped Society: THX 1138") for describing science fiction as "often nothing more than a language structure for describing events which are concretely unimaginable or meaningless in ordinary terms," but I cannot forgive him for

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equating that language structure to "the production, the creation of a concrete image of the impossible out of available techniques" in the science-fiction film. Overcoming the technical difficulties of making science-fiction images concrete on film is not the same as the difficulties of making a science-fiction situation believable. Fiction responds to difficulties; the ideas that lie within the science-fiction situation are most dramatically expressed when the difficulties are surmounted. Beck would have us believe that the film's creation of the concrete image is enough to delight us. It had better be.

The only place where greater caution with the film critic should be exercised is the point at which the critic begins to refer to "a synthesis of insightful visual imagination" and "an interpenetration of fantasy and reality." Phrases like those suggest that the logic of the film won't bear inspection.

If the science-fiction film actually makes images concrete, it may be the concreteness of the image which ultimately turns us off. Science fiction, like fantasy, is a literature of the imagination; it requires vigorous participation on the part of the reader, a willing suspension of disbelief—although science fiction, in contrast to fantasy, gives the reader reasons for believing. This reader participation allows the science-fiction writer to span parsecs believably; to cross centuries credibly; to suggest the most sensational of cities, the most creative of creatures, the most startling of social systems, the most incredible variations upon a theme. And if the writer has done it persuasively, the reader constructs for himself, out of his own imagination, what he longs for or dreads.

As John W. Campbell pointed out in 1947 (in an essay called "The Science of Science Fiction Writing"), "the trick is to describe the horrified, not the horror, the love-struck, not the lady-love." But the science-fiction film, at great expense and difficulty, applies a face to the horror, and it seems prosaic or laughable; the film is stuck with its images, and in them the viewer does not participate. Often the film image cannot live up to the reader's expectations; that is why books seldom make good movies, even though we want to see the impossible achieved. This is particularly true of science-fiction books. Moreover, when the effort to make the image concrete represents the major accomplishment of a film, the substance becomes incidental. Where science fiction is specific about ideas and suggestive about images, the science-fiction film is specific about images and allusive—elusive as well—about meaning. The difference is all the difference in this world—or another.

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Stan Freberg, the satirist turned ad man, once created a radio commercial about the advantages of radio advertising over television; it began with an announcer turning Lake Michigan into a gigantic bowl of flavored gelatin, covering it with whipped cream, and towing into position overhead a cherry the size of an island; and it ended with the announcer challenging a television executive to create a similar commercial.

The same thing might be said about science fiction and fantasy on radio; radio brought out the best in science fiction: the sound effects were relatively easy and much more effective than visual images in suggesting scope, changing scenes, creating moods, and eliciting listener imagination. The famous 1938 Mercury Theater production of *The War of the Worlds* created an astonishing (and much studied) reaction from its audience. But there were others: "Lights Out" and "Inner Sanctum" had some science fiction mixed with the horror in the 1940s, but science fiction came into its own in the 1950s with a handful of shows of which "Dimension X" and "X Minus One" were the best. Many of them were well done. Four of my *Galaxy* stories were adapted for "X Minus One," and I liked two of them very well, and the other two fairly well. For contrast, I offer the 1959 television adaptation of one of them, my "The Cave of Might," into Desilu Playhouse's "Man in Orbit"—even with Lee Marvin and E. G. Marshall it was disappointing. Today's counterparts to the radio adaptations of science fiction are records and tapes of dramatic readings and even dramatizations. And the old radio programs are still available on record and tape.

If, in spite of all the drawbacks of films, the science-fiction reader persists in a masochistic desire to see and understand science-fiction movies, where can help be found? I suggest that the reader stay away from film critics unless the reader wants information about film; most critics talk nonsense about the obvious, and they provide only confusion about science fiction. They insist, for instance, on referring to science fiction as "sci-fi," which immediately alienates the science-fiction reader; he knows that the only legitimate abbreviation is "SF" (or, rarely, "stf"), although some modern writers insist that "SF" also can stand for "speculative fiction."

The best book about science fiction films I have found is William Johnson's *Focus on the Science Fiction Film,* which presents both sides of most issues and includes comments by writers as well as critics and filmmakers. John Baxter's *Science Fiction in the Cinema* is thorough; Denis Gifford's *Science Fiction Film* lists more titles than any other book but says less about each. Ralph J. Amelio's *Hal*

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in the Classroom: Science Fiction Films contains some provocative but often misguided essays; among them are Susan Sontag's and Bernard Beck's. All the books listed above have useful bibliographies and filmographies. A different kind of book, *Cinema of the Fantastic* by Chris Steinbrunner and Burt Goldblatt, has many hard-to-find photographs, and chapters on fifteen movies from Meliés's *A Trip to the Moon* to *Forbidden Planet.* The May 1979 issue of the SFRA Newsletter recommends a new study, John Brosnan's *Future Tense: The Cinema of Science Fiction.*

If a reader wishes to develop a personal history of the science-fiction film, the obvious starting point is Meliés's *A Trip to the Moon,* a brief bit of whimsy filmed in 1902 and patterned after Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* with influences from H. G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon.* Meliés had a couple of earlier efforts, *An Astronomer's Dream* and a version of *She.*

After a number of other curiosities that are available and probably not worth seeing for anything more than antiquarian purposes (with the exception of the 1925 film of A. Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* with Wallace Beery as Professor Challenger and some effective, early, animated dinosaurs), the German director Fritz Lang produced *Metropolis* in 1926 and *Woman in the Moon* in 1929. Both are historically important, particularly for special effects, and both are melodramatic and overacted; audiences with whom I have viewed them usually find them funny. An American film of 1930, *Just Imagine,* is supposed to be funny but is only ridiculous; it does include some impressive futuristic shots of a 1980 metropolis.

The meaningful history of filmed science fiction (as opposed to science-fiction film) begins in 1931 with *Frankenstein,* the Boris Karloff version that inspired a thousand parodies, including the most recent, Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein.* Yet the original film still has the power to move audiences. So does the more cultish film *King Kong,* epic in scope and special effects, and even interesting thematically. The remake has little to recommend it but color. Another on my list came along the same year as *King Kong*; it is *The Invisible Man.* Although it perpetuated the persistent medieval theme "he meddled in God's domain" and "he ventured into areas man was meant to leave alone," the film does better than most at considering more than one side of a question, in this case the drawbacks as well as the advantages of invisibility, and the special effects are well done. About the same time came a film that doesn't quite make my list but is nevertheless a reasonably effective adaptation of Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau,* namely *The Island of Lost Souls*

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(1932) with Charles Laughton. Again, the recent remake is poorer.

I once thought that the British *Things to Come* (1936) was the only good science-fiction film ever made. It was based on H. G. Wells's 1933 book *The Shape of Things to Come*; and it had a scenario and frequent memoranda to the participants by Wells, leading to my later conclusion that the really good science-fiction movies had someone intimately associated with the production who knew a great deal about written science fiction. Since *Things to Come* other films have come along, and the virtues of *Things to Come* have not survived the intervening years undiminished. The early war scenes are cheaply executed and betray their simple pacifism. But the final sequences, projected into the year 2036, still have the power to captivate; and Raymond Massey's final statement of man's destiny still sounds the clear, pure call of main-current science fiction. I have been surprised at the number of science-fiction authors of my generation, such as Isaac Asimov and Fred Pohl, who have expressed the same reactions to this film.

The Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers serials produced between 1936 and 1940, along with such lesser works as *The Phantom Empire* (1935) and *The Undersea Kingdom* (1936), are high camp today with their comicstrip villains and heroes, their cardboard robots, their firework rocketships, and their absurd and cheating cliffhangers. But they provide a kind of reliving of the old 1930s Saturday matinee experience, and some viewers have found them good fun. *Star Wars*, it has been said, is George Lucas's tribute to *Flash Gordon*.

Destination Moon (1950) was George Pal's first science-fiction production, and the first film adapted from the work of a magazine science-fiction writer, Robert Heinlein; he also worked on the script, which was based on his Scribner's juvenile, *Rocketship Galileo*. The film is marred by melodramatics and some ridiculous comic relief, but the space sequences and the lunar episodes (the moonscapes were painted by astronomical and sometime science-fiction artist Chesley Bonestell) are remarkable bits of prophecy. During the televised portions of the Apollo trips, the visual predictions of space and the moon surface gave many of us the experience of *dejá vù*: we had seen it before, only clearer, in *Destination Moon*.

George Pal, as producer and later director, would have much to do with later adaptations of science-fiction classics such as Balmer and Wylie's *When Worlds Collide* (1951, and Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1953) and *The Time Machine* (1960). All are worth viewing as adaptations of written science fiction, although all fall short in one way or another, the first two more than the last.

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Of the some two thousand or so remaining films, I would include in my historical overview: *Forbidden Planet* (1956), which has Robbie the Robot, comic relief, and an idiotic love story (all modeled, to be sure, on *The Tempest*), but also the marvelous idea of the Id Monster and scenes of the lost civilization which produced it; *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), about the replacement of people by pod duplicates, which is nicely and soberly done, and liked by many critics more than I do (the remake has produced mixed reactions); *The Village of the Damned* (1960), a relatively faithful adaptation of the Wyndham novel (the 1963 *Day of the Triffids* is not as faithful and a lesser film); *Barbarella* (1967), which has a bit of nudity for the libidinous and also lovely scenes and a delightful satire on a number of science-fiction themes; and, of course, the incomparable *2001: A Space Odyssey,* which in spite of some quarrels with its obscure ending and the unexplained murderousness of HAL, is the most completely realized vision of the future yet achieved on film and an excellent motion picture.

The recent *Star Wars* (1977) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) are more important for what they have accomplished at the box office than what they have achieved artistically. *Star Wars* can be enjoyed effortlessly at the fairy-tale level; and it offers a pleasant, lived-in quality to its scenes and costumes; and the scope and effectiveness of its special effects are worth the admission price. *Close Encounters* has a magnificent final scene in the appearance of the alien spaceship, but it seems to me that the first two-thirds of the film is irrelevant and the two UFO fanatics who have fought their way to the spot end up as spectators little more relevant to what goes on there than the rest of the audience; I would give it high praise, however, for never once permitting a character to suggest that the aliens might be dangerous and people should either arm themselves or flee. The most important aspect of the two films, however, is their refutation of the frequent excuse against making first-class science-fiction films, that SF films never make money. *Battlestar Galactica* has demonstrated, however, that special effects do not an SF movie make, though it will be cited as a reason not to do SF on television.

All of these, however, are part of the canon of the science-fiction film, along with films that have a similar appeal but are not sufficiently distanced from the present to qualify as science fiction: such as *Lost Horizon* (1937), *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).

Many science-fiction films have been produced since *Destination*

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Moon, but if I haven't listed them above I find them seriously flawed or completely hopeless. Some film critics, for instance, liked *The Day the Earth Stood Still* or *The Thing,* both released in 1951; but any reader who recalls the science-fiction novelettes "Farewell to the Master" by Harry Bates and "Who Goes There?" by John W. Campbell must reject the films based on them if only for tossing away a good story and making a lesser one.

The Verne adaptations, *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1959), *From the Earth to the Moon* (1964), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1965), and others generally are performed as period pieces; they are amusing but can't be taken seriously as science fiction: they are flawed and unfaithful. My favorite of this type is a Czech film, *The Wonderful Invention* (1958), sometimes called *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne,* but it has been unavailable since its initial showing.

Godard's science-fiction film *Alphaville* (1965) is frequently admired, but I find it obscure and unconvincing.

Other films have been marred by mindless anti-scientism, such as *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) or *The Power* (1967); or by illogical elements, as in *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and its many sequels, *Charly* (1968), or *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970); or by no logic at all, as in *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *Silent Running* (1972), *West World* (1973), or *Soylent Green* (1973). It is interesting to note that the resolution that *Soylent Green* presents as the ultimate in horror could make a satisfying science-fiction story—if the problem were how to convince the public that its prejudice against eating a product made from human flesh was irrational and unreasonable. *A Clockwork Orange,* on the other hand, justifies, if it does not actually glorify, violence; I find this more repugnant than the small, neat crackers of Soylent Green.

In spite of their flaws, the films listed above are the best of their kind, and all of them may find their place in a science-fiction series with the reservations noted. Their kind simply is not a high art.

Science fiction on television is even worse. Its only value—in the way *Amazing Stories* was once considered by John W. Campbell as a primer for the more demanding science fiction published in *Astounding*—is to provide an introduction for young people willing to move on to the written word. Series have even more flaws than science-fiction films and demand larger audiences (thus requiring a reduction to lowest-command-denominator approach) for survival. Nevertheless, *Star Trek* certainly, and certain episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery* among others, achieved moments of

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science-fiction value. The best science-fiction adaptations on television have been one-shots, like the early adaptations of Robert Sheckley's "The People Trap" and Alfred Bester's "Fondly Fahrenheit," for which Bester himself wrote the script. Even the 1969 ABC-TV movie-of-the-week, *The Immortal,* that was an adaptation of my 1962 novel *The Immortals,* was far superior to the series that followed in 1970.

Perhaps a discussion of what went wrong with *The Immortal* would be a good place to bring this analysis of science fiction and the visual media to a conclusion. There are so many things that an author can criticize about the adaptation of his work that I hardly know where to begin, but let us ignore the acting (Bob Specht, the scriptwriter and the person responsible for it getting on television at all, thought Christopher George was dynamic enough to keep the series on the air for a second season all on his own), the production, and even the quality of the scripts (a Screenwriters Guild strike was threatened and the producer, Anthony Wilson, had to sign up a lot of scripts in a hurry), and concentrate on the ideas.

The big mistake, made early in the planning for the series, was to play the series for adventure rather than science fiction. (That has been the downfall of most science-fiction adaptations—remember *The Thing*?) In fact, the word went out that no science-fiction writers would be considered as scriptwriters for the series. In retrospect, Bob Specht's decision to make the Immortal a test-car driver, influenced no doubt by the success of the San Francisco car-chase scenes in *Bullitt* and perhaps a major reason the original script was attractive to Paramount and ABC, may have been a fatal mistake for the series: executives saw it as a chase story, with ten minutes or more of every episode eaten up in car-chase footage.

In the final analysis, the fact that Ben Richards (Marshall Cartwright in the novel) was immortal made little difference. The subject of my novel was the way the fact of his immortality changed society. Marshall Cartwright's personal problems had so little relevance to the novel that he disappears after an initial scene of blood drawing and doesn't make another appearance until the end. But Ben Richards's dramatic value is only his importance to someone else: that his importance is his blood, which can make old people temporarily young again, is no more significant for the narrative than if he knew the location of important papers or of a fortune in jewels, or had killed someone or could save someone from a false accusation. It was, in other words, viewed as another *Fugitive.* Ben Richard's immortality was only an excuse for a chase; and the episodes that

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resulted from it were simple repetitions of discovery, chase, capture, and escape: cookie-cutter episodes, indistinguishable one from another.

The Immortal had the potential to concern itself with life and death, subjects too important to trivialize. But that may be the ultimate problem with science fiction on film: with a few important exceptions, film makers have been afraid or unwilling to take science fiction seriously, and unless any subject is taken seriously it cannot produce meaningful art.

IMPORTANT PRODUCTIONS IN THE HISTORY OF THE SCIENCE-FICTION FILM

1898	An Astronomer's Dream (Meliés)
1899	She (Meliés)
1902	A Trip to the Moon (Meliés)
1906	The ? Motorist (Booth)
1909	A Trip to Jupiter (French Pathe)
1910	A Trip to Mars (Edison)
1919	The First Men in the Moon (Abbas)
1924	Aeleta (Russian)
1925	The Lost World (Hoyt)
1926	Metropolis (Lang)
1930	Just Imagine (Butler)
1931	Frankenstein (Whale)
1932	The Island of Lost Souls (Kenton)
1933	King Kong (Cooper)
	The Invisible Man (Whale)
	Deluge (Feist)
1934	Transatlantic Tunnel (Elvey)
1936	Things to Come (Menzies)
1936-40	Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers serials
1937	Lost Horizon (Capra)
1950	Destination Moon (Pal)
	The Thing from Another World (Hawks)
	The Day the Earth Stood Still (Wise)
	The Man in the White Suit (Mackendrick)
1951	When Worlds Collide (Pal)
1953	The War of the Worlds (Pal)
1954	1984 (Anderson)
1955	20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (Fleischer)
1956	Forbidden Planet (Wilcox)
	The Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Siegel)
1957	The Incredible Shrinking Man (Arnold)
1958	The Wonderful Invention (Zeman)
1960	The Time Machine (Pal)
	Village of the Damned (Rilla)
1963	The Day of the Triffids (Sekeley)
1964	From the Earth to the Moon (Haskin)
	Dr. Strangelove (Kubrick)
1965	The Tenth Victim (Petri)
	Alphaville (Godard)
1966	Fahrenheit 451 (Truffaut)
	Fantastic Voyage (Fleischer)
1967	Barbarella (Vadim)
1968	2001: A Space Odyssey (Kubrick)
	Planet of the Apes (Schaffner)
	Charly (Nelson)
1970	Colossus: The Forbin Project

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(Sargent)

1971 A Clockwork Orange (Kubrick)
The Andromeda Strain (Wise)
THX 1138 (Lucas)

1972 Silent Running (Trumbell)

1973 West World (Crichton)
Soylent Green (Fleischer)

1974 Young Frankenstein (Brooks)
Zardoz (Boorman)

1975 A Boy and His Dog (Jones)
The Land that Time Forgot (Connor)
Rollerball (Jewison)
The Stepford Wives (Forbes)

1976 The Food of the Gods (Gordon)
Futureworld (Heffron)
King Kong (Guillermin)
Logan's Run (Anderson)
The Man Who Fell to Earth (Roeg)

1977 Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Spielberg)
Demon Seed (Cammel)
The Island of Dr. Moreau (Taylor)
The People that Time Forgot (Connor)
Star Wars (Lucas)
Wizards (Bakshi)

1978 The Invasion of the Bodysnatchers (Kaufman)
Lord of the Rings (Bakshi)
Superman (Donner)
Watership Down (Rosen)

1979 Alien (Scott)

SECOND ANSWER TO PROFESSOR CRACKER'S ANTITELEPHONE (from page 101)

Dr. Loveface had read some old SF stories about time travel into the past that got around the familiar difficulty of whether a person would or wouldn't exist if he entered his past and killed his parents when they were babies. The gimmick was to assume that whenever anything from the future enters the past in a way that changes the past, the universe splits into two parallel worlds that are identical except that in one the alteration took place, in the other it didn't.

This gimmick can be applied to tachyonic messages. As soon as such a message enters the universe's past, the big split occurs. A person sending such a message can never get a reply because he continues to exist in the universe in which the message was sent, not in the duplicate universe in which the message was received. This permits one-way communication without contradiction, but not an exchange of tachyonic messages within the same universe.

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SOLUTION LIST TO TITLE FIND (see page 99)

1. ANOME (The), Jack Vance
2. ARENA, Fredric Brown
3. BIG PLANET, Jack Vance
4. BUG JACK BARRON, Norman Spinrad
5. CALL ME JOE, Poul Anderson
6. COLD EQUATIONS (The), Tom Godwin
7. DARFSTELLER (The), Walter M. Miller, Jr.
8. DAVY, Edgar Pangborn
9. DEMOLISHED MAN (The), Alfred Bester
10. DUNE, Frank Herbert
11. FIRST CONTACT, Murray Leinster
12. FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON, Daniel Keyes
13. GOLEM (The), Avram Davidson
14. GULF, Robert A. Heinlein
15. I, ROBOT, Isaac Asimov
16. IT, Theodore Sturgeon
17. LIFELINE, Robert A. Heinlein
18. LOST WORLD (The), A. Conan Doyle
19. LOVERS (The), Philip Jose Farmer
20. MARS IS HEAVEN, Ray Bradbury
21. MARY, Damon Knight
22. NERVES, Lester del Rey
23. NIGHTFALL, Isaac Asimov
24. NOVA, Samuel R. Delany
25. PAST MASTER, R.A. Lafferty
26. PLANET OF EXILE, Ursula K. LeGuin
27. PROUD ROBOT (The), Henry Kuttner
28. RE-BIRTH, John Wyndham
29. RINGWORLD, Larry Niven
30. ROGUE MOON, Algis Budrys
31. SLAN, A.E. Van Vogt
32. SPACE MERCHANTS (The), Frederik Pohl & C. M. Kornbluth
33. SPACEPAW, Gordon R. Dickson
34. STAR (The), Arthur C. Clarke
35. TO SERVE MAN, Damon Knight
36. TWILIGHT, John W. Campbell, Jr.
37. UBIK, Philip K. Dick
38. WALDO, Robert A. Heinlein

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A LITTLE INCORRECTNESS

by Richard D. Orr

art: Philip Foglio

Mr. Orr was born in 1949, and now has a BA degree from Lawrence University and a JD degree from Willamette University College of Law. He, his wife, and their dog live in Appleton, WI; they report last summer was a good one for their garden—especially tomatoes. The author started writing SF in late 1977, partly as a result of reading this magazine. "A Little Incorrectness" is Mr. Orr's first sale.

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"I don't care if Hawthorne offered you 300 *tons* of soybean meal. He isn't here—and he's not likely to get back to this system again for two solar orbits. I'm here now and I'm offering you 150 pounds. Take it or leave it!"

Gumpa's tentacles undulated mildly and turned reddish-purple. He calmly, but with obvious effort, forced his organ of articulation to make the audible sounds humans could understand. "We must the proposal consider further. To part with so fine a device . . . so carefully crafted by our singularly talented artisans . . ."

"It's a good piece, all right. And I want to trade for it. But if you think I'll hold still for the kind of shakedown you're talking about, you're crazy."

"An offer of 250 pounds we might accept."

I've got him going now, thought Summers. Time to jazz it up a bit. He stood up and raised his blood pressure a few notches by thinking about a previous trade he'd made with Gumpa that hadn't turned out as advertised. His face was already reddening as he began, "You gurgling octopus! I've tried to be calm but you talk like you thought I was crazy. 250 pounds is twice what the gadget's worth, but—against my better judgment—I'll give you 175 just to get this thing over with. And if you turn that down, I'm leaving; and I hope you lose your ninth appendage!"

Gumpa's apprentice, Salja, appeared to be taken aback. His tentacles began to flail wildly. But Gumpa calmly stated, "It is for 175 pounds of soybean meal done."

"OK, now you're talking." Summers turned to his young companion. "Don, go back to the ship and get 175 pounds of meal for Mr. Gumpa." As Don left, Summers was rapidly calming down. He began to pack the Type III Matter Synthesizer for its trip back to the ship.

In a few minutes, Don returned with the soy meal and deposited the heavy bags on the floor in front of Gumpa. Summers put one hand on the top bag. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Gumpa. I'll look forward to seeing you again next trip."

"It has for us also a pleasure Mr. Summers been." Gumpa rested a tentacle on the meal bag.

"Come on, Don."

When Gumpa knew that Summers and Don were back at their ship, he turned to Salja, assumed the manner of a mentor, and spoke in his native language. "Tell us what we have learned."

"Like the man Hawthorne, the man Summers seeks to increase

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the personal store of value over which he exercises dominion. But Hawthorne hopes to do this by speaking incorrectly. For example, while Hawthorne promised to give us 300 pounds, he was planning on making the weight short by 10%, meaning he truly meant to convey only 270 pounds. Of that amount, only 60% would have been usable by us because of rot and spoilage occasioned by unwholesome storage conditions aboard his ship. We would only have received 162 usable pounds from Hawthorne, whereas Summers has given us a full 175 pounds, all of which is usable."

"That is correct, Salja. You grow in understanding."

"I am honored by your praise, Gumpa." Salja's tentacles turned slightly orange.

Summers punched on the autopilot. "Should make Outpost 09 in a couple hours."

"Sounds good to me," said Don, reclining on his couch. "You really laid it on pretty thick for Gumpa and his sidekick."

"That's all the Auctalians understand, kid. They're weird that way. If you don't get really mad, they think you're not offering enough . . . that you're holding out on 'em. You've got to respect anyone who can make a product like their Synthesizers, but they're a little bit dense at times."

The trip to Outpost 09 was uneventful. Don dozed as Summers mentally outlined the stops he hoped to make in the next week. Summers docked without waking Don, but the Customs buzzer roused him. The hatch opened; and Corporal Jules, Customs Inspector, strode in.

"Anything to declare, Summers?"

"Hello, Jules, my boy. I've got a dozen permo-rose plants from Eptusso and a Type III Matter Synthesizer from Auctal."

"Type III . . . ," said Jules to himself, fingering a hand-held information terminal. "That'll be seven and a half gold credits, all together." Jules accepted Summers's debit card and inserted it in his unit. As Summers's receipt for the tax payment was being printed, Jules said, "I'll have to inspect the Synthesizer . . . new regulations."

"Unpack the thing, Don." Summers sounded resigned. He knew Jules was moderately honest but completely intractable.

The packing material came off, revealing a slender rectangular solid about a meter tall. It was unadorned except for three buttons and an access door opening up on the materialization chamber. The casing was very solid. The Auctalians always stressed that there

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were no user-serviceable parts inside. Not that it could be opened without a laser, anyway. And that would broil the innards so that the Auctalian's proprietary construction techniques would remain secret.

Jules pushed the first button on the Synthesizer and then opened the door to the materialization chamber. Instead of the expected pint of water, there was a small bar of gold—about 100 grams.

"What the Sam Hill!" exclaimed Summers.

But six times Jules pushed . . . twice for each button . . . and six times a bar of gold appeared.

"I'm afraid I'll have to seize this Synthesizer under General Instruction 13 . . . potentially disruptive to trade. I don't know if you'll get this one back or not, Summers. If this really is what it looks like . . . well, we obviously can't have you running around churning out gold merely by pressing a button." Jules left, carrying the Synthesizer and gold bars.

"Blast! Gumpa's really done it this time. When the Union hears about this, there'll be no end to the hassle."

"I'm no chemist," said Don, "but isn't what we just saw physically impossible?"

"That's what everyone thought about the first Auctalian Synthesizer. And that's what everyone said as they introduced each newer type. Everyone thought Type II, with breathing mixture, was impossible. Type III, with synthetic plastipatch, really shook folks up."

"But water, breathing mixture, and plastipatch are all combinations of elements. Gold is a pure element."

"You're right, Don. But you just never know with these Auctalians. I'm more worried about what happens to the trading economy if our esteemed elected officials get the notion they can do what Jules is trying to keep me from doing—run around churning out gold merely by pressing a button."

"But what can we do?"

"First thing is to find out what Jules says in his report to Regional HQ. Then, we just might have to take that Synthesizer away from Jules."

"That's what I was afraid of, Summers." Don was taking a big step toward becoming an adult. Summers was both surprised and pleased by Don's grasp of the situation, but he stopped himself before he started feeling too proud of the kid.

"You go over and see Betty at the Communications Tent. That shouldn't be too unpleasant. I seem to remember a little dalliance

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between you two last time we were here." Don blushed. "Find out what Jules said in his report. And find out, if possible, what reply he got."

"I'll get right on it."

It's so hard, thought Jules. My salary is barely enough to get by on, and now—a Gold Synthesizer on a silver platter. The pattern fits . . . almost. The first Type II Synthesizer was supposedly a Type I. The first Type III was supposedly a Type II. But all Type II's had two buttons and all Type III's had three. This one has three buttons, but all three produce gold. The advent of each previous Type was followed by brisk trading in the machines. Water, breathing mixture, and plastipatch are all important mercantile commodities. But synthesis of the monetary element is a whole different ball game. If the Union finds out about it, they'll surely impose regulations—and then there will be a government monopoly on gold synthesis. But what if this Synthesizer is one-of-a-kind? Then I just might get away with keeping it all to myself—provided I don't use it so heavily as to arouse suspicion. On the other hand, it's my duty to report this. I just don't know. I'll decide tomorrow.

He pressed the "Synthesize Water" button, withdrew another bar of gold, and rolled it over and over in his hand.

"What is the location of the Synthesizer of late conveyed to the man Summers?" Gumpa asked, looking at Salja with an evaluative eye.

"It has been taken from the man Summers by the man Jules, a local representative of the governors of the humans."

"Is it a theft?"

"The man Summers does not think so. The governors laid claim to it only after it was found to produce gold bars—their unit of exchange. The taking was done in the name of preservation of orderly trade. But there is something incorrect in the man Jules's thoughts. Though purporting to act in the name of the governors, he is tempted to act for himself alone—for the purpose of increasing the personal store of value over which he exercises dominion."

"Does the experience we have provided make the man Jules grow in understanding?"

"It could, but it does not. The man Jules prevents his own growth. He cannot comprehend the Lesson of Gold. But I think the man Summers *does* comprehend . . . as he did the Lesson of Silver."

"It is said, Salja, in the literature of the humans, that the element

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gold excites emotions which may be invoked in no other way."

"I am yet not full-learned, Gumpa. But I hazard to predict that the man Summers will not disappoint you."

"We shall see, Salja."

Don's hormones refused to abate their headlong rush through his body as he walked back toward the ship. Betty was on his mind, entwined with superlatives. Effortlessly, he opened the ship's hatch and automatically went inside.

"Well, what did you find out?"

"Huh?"

"The Synthesizer . . . you know . . . the one that draws gold out of thin air. What did Jules's report say?"

"He didn't file any report."

"Are you sure?"

"Ah . . . Yeah, Summers, I'm sure. Betty checked twice. But no outbound transmissions from Jules, or anyone else, for that matter, since last week. She'll call us on the Port-Com if he does come in, though."

"Ok. Thanks, Don. That's all."

As Don left for his cabin, Summers stretched out on his couch and fixed his gaze on the Port-Com light. Presently, droopy eyelids closed and Summers ushered a full-color dream into his partial consciousness. He was walking along a dry, dusty road. The noonday suns blazed above him and his shirt was wet with sweat. His throat was sandpaper-dry and he wanted only one thing: water. Walk . . . walk . . . walk. Always welcome at the sign of the dromedary. "I'll have a glass of water, please."

"Certainly, sir. That'll be a quarter credit." Fractional scrip changed hands.

Summers gulped. The water glass became the water pipe. Summers was swimming back to the water tower, the well, the stream, and, finally, the reservoir. Treading water, he saw a large vessel full of animals. There was Noah waving at him and a giraffe flexing its huge neck muscles in a sort of stretch.

"I knew the man Summers would learn."

"Salja!" Gumpa's voice was full of mock gruffness.

The younger Auctalian's tentacles drooped noticeably. "I mean . . . I anticipated illumination for the man Summers through our good offices and I now report—with joy—that he has learned the Lesson of Gold."

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"How is this sure, Salja?"

"He has dreamed it."

"Salja, the humans often dream without memory of the learning." Gumpa stroked Salja rhythmically to let him know that no permanent parting was in store for them just because of a little overly bold extrapolation.

"But the dream is positive."

"Yes, Salja, it is positive."

"The man Summers dreamed thus about the silver." Salja's anticipation was almost unbearable.

"That is correct, Salja. So far, the man Summers is on the same path. In fact, I share your optimism. The Lessons of Silver and Gold are almost the same. To know one is to know both—unless gold's uniqueness to the humans renders a contrary result possible. That is what we are attempting to ascertain." Gumpa peered at Salja intently. "In a way, Salja, it is sad. The humans are, perhaps, the last race in need of our instruction. What will happen to us when we can no longer teach?"

"I think, Gumpa, that then we shall have to be content to learn only instead of both teaching and learning. In this I see no cause for sorrow. Indeed, it would be cause to rejoice. We would have achieved our goal."

"Salja, you are wise beyond your years."

Jules hadn't slept well. As soon as he woke up, his mind immediately resumed consideration of the problem that he had been thinking about the night before. What was he to do about the Gold Synthesizer? He'd better decide soon. Maybe, if he didn't over-use it . . . Just as Jules was beginning to worry about what would happen to him if he got caught, the door to his bungalow burst open. It was Summers. "I've come for the Gold Synthesizer, Jules." Summers was brandishing a las-gun rather awkwardly.

"You crazy or something," Jules's voice quivered noticeably. "You can't hold up a Union Customs Inspector and expect to get away with it. You'll be caught within a week."

"Not if I'm not reported. I happen to know you've filed no report about the Gold Synthesizer—probably holding out for yourself. Now, being late with your report is a fairly minor infraction. But if you blow the whistle on me, I guarantee I'll sic the mind probe boys on you; keeping this little gem for yourself is not so minor an offense. Here's the deal. You keep what gold you've already got. You also fail to make any report about the Synthesizer—or my relieving you

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of it—and I keep my mouth shut about your little plan to hold out on your higher-ups."

Now, this was getting more petty—more within Jules's ken. "And meanwhile, you've got the machine and all the gold you want? No deal! I want a percentage . . . say every tenth bar you make." Jules had given up all hope of retaining sole possession of the machine. He felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"You numbskull! There isn't going to be any percentage. I've got to destroy the machine and hope no more of 'em show up."

"I don't see why."

"You wouldn't. Need I remind you, you're not in the strongest bargaining position?" Summers brandished the las-gun, still feeling awkward about threatening someone with it. But Jules got the message. "Besides, how long do you think you could keep a thing like this to yourself?"

Jules contorted his mouth with a scowl, as if to say, "Yeah, you're right, but I don't like it."

Summers tied Jules up, mostly just to save face, for he knew Jules lacked the stomach to pursue him. He made the bonds loose so Jules would have no trouble getting out of them.

"It seems like such a waste," said Don, as he watched the Gold Synthesizer leaving the ship's waste-disposal chute, beginning its trip to certain oblivion in the larger of the two suns of the Severous System.

"We had to do it." Summers dialed up the navigational program for their next port of call. "If that unit was a mistake—a one-of-a-kind fluke—we'd have never been able to hold onto it. At the very least, some crook more larcenous than I am would have relieved us of it. At the worst, the Union would have 'confiscated' it through agents more efficient than old Jules. Problem is, whoever got ahold of it would have used it."

"But what if this is just the first of a new line of Auctalian Synthesizers?"

"If that's so, you better spend your gold while it's still worth something. But I don't think we'll be seeing any more of these. You see, Don, about a year and a half before you signed on, Gumpa sold me a Type II Synthesizer that turned out nothing but silver. You haven't seen any of them around, have you? I tried to open the thing up to see what made it tick but its innards blew sky-high—almost put a hole in my cabin wall. Well, I sent the whole pile the same place we just pushed the Gold Synthesizer. Only difference between that

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time and this is that I'm the only one who knew about the Silver Synthesizer—until now. Well, I blew my stack at Gumpa and he gave me a replacement. He knew the instant that Silver Synthesizer blew up. They keep tabs on every Synthesizer they sell—don't ask me how."

"Well, at least on the next trip to Auctal, you'll really have something to get mad at Gumpa about—not only a Synthesizer that doesn't do what it's supposed to do, but possible trouble with the law on account of it. Hell, that could make your blood boil. I can see it all now. You'll turn his tentacles blue."

"You're learning, kid."

"I inquire of you, Salja, what you have learned today."

"The man Summers *has* learned the Lesson of Gold. I have watched from afar and seen the man Summers destroy the Type III Synthesizer from which gold came. When he sent it to its demise, 17 bar-units of gold remained in its store and there were 28 hours remaining prior to the time at which its autoschedule would have deleted the gold-dispensing function. Summers believed the unit actually synthesized gold."

"May we infer from this that the Lessons of Silver and Gold are, indeed, identical?"

"We may only infer that this is true of the man Summers. The inference you suggest is too broad."

"That is correct, Salja."

"If I may, Gumpa, I would like to place a question you may desire to answer for my elucidation."

"You may place the question."

"We told the man Summers the unit he received was a Type III Matter Synthesizer. Did we speak incorrectly?"

"Technically, we did not, Salja. We told Summers the unit was a Type III Synthesizer. In fact it was a Type III Synthesizer which also contained a supply of gold. What we told him was not incorrect, but we did not tell him everything. Such would be constructively deemed an incorrectness among Auctalians. It is to be countenanced in dealing with aliens only in extremely rare instances where close monitoring of subsequent events will be provided. A full member of the Panel on Alien Instruction has monitored the man Summers since we traded the Gold Dispenser to him. You are correct to have placed the question, Salja. You grow in understanding."

"I am honored by your praise, Gumpa. And I see now that the man Summers also grows in understanding."

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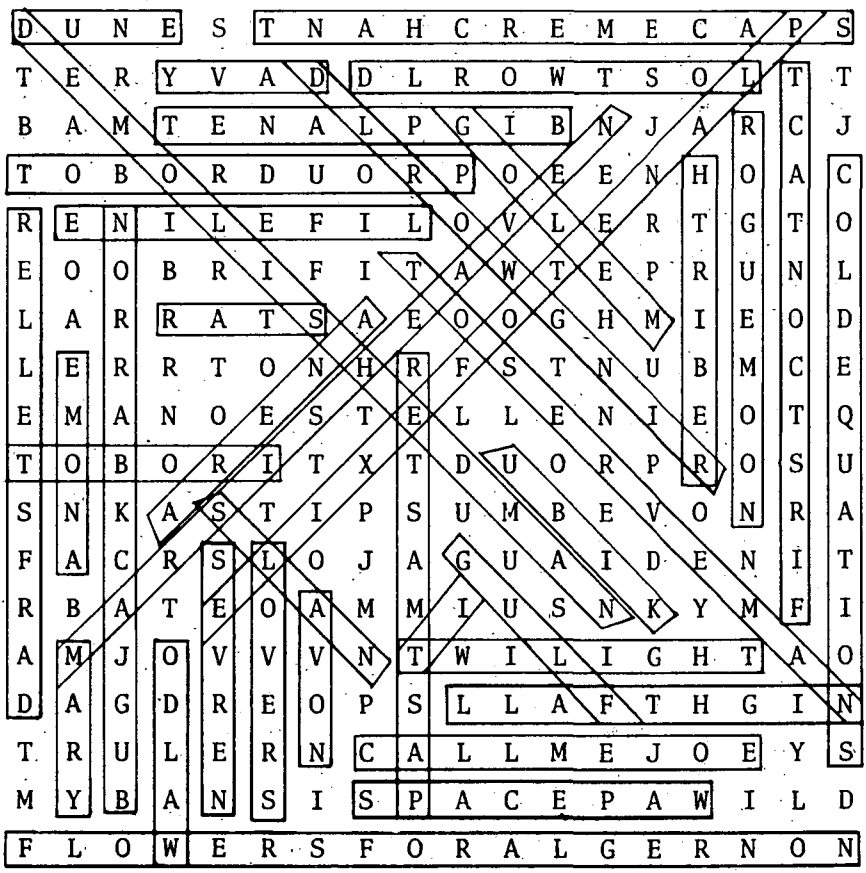
Gumpa's tentacles undulated in smooth, pulsating waves and took on a brownish hue. He placed one tentacle on Salja and, together, they crossed the room. Gumpa took two soy wafers out of a cabinet and handed one to Salja. As they metabolized the soy protein, both felt a warm glow inside.

TITLE FIND SOLUTION (see page 99)



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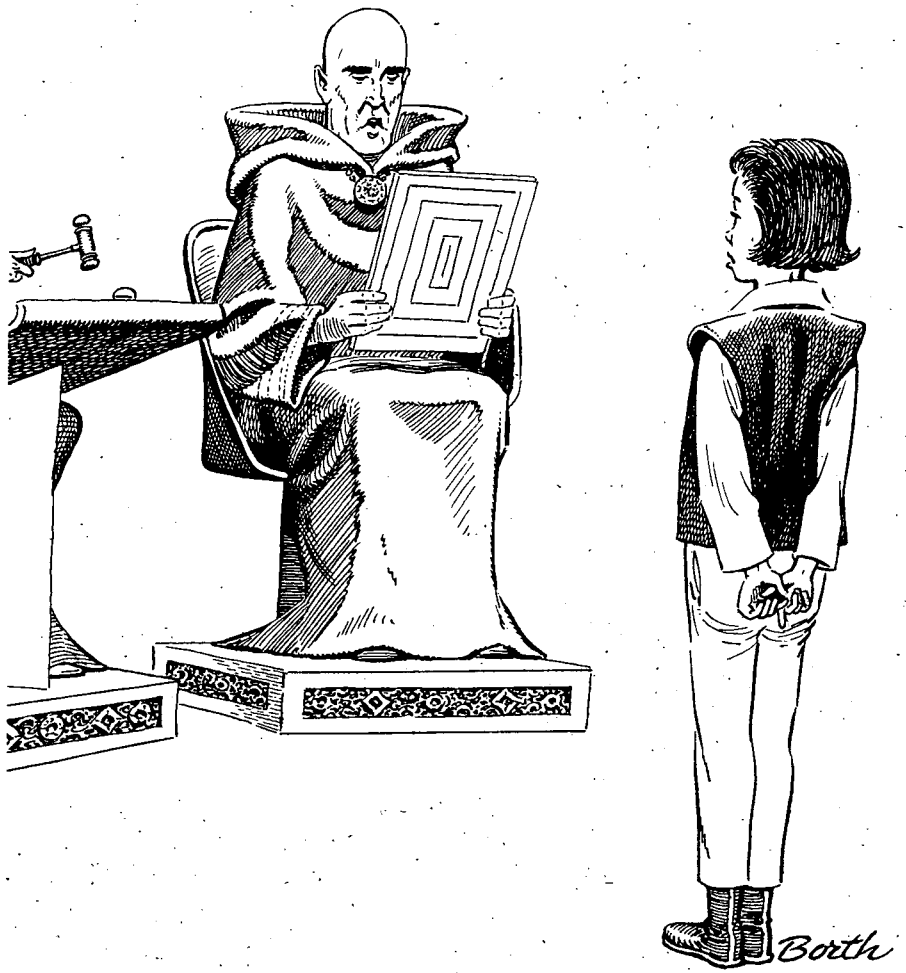
VARIATION ON A THEME FROM BEETHOVEN

by Sharon Webb
art: Frank Borth



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Mrs. Webb reports that she keeps a writer's notebook. Sometimes she writes things in it, and sometimes her subconscious does the writing. Once in a while, she'll browse around in it and find a sentence that blooms out into a complete story. At other times, she finds things like: "All we need is a bit of ectoplasm," said Surrency, "and we can have us a clone." Mrs. Webb can't account for it at all.

I.

They brought him before the Committee of Vesta when he was eleven years old. His bladder was tense with pressure and it hurt him. Sweat filmed his palms.

The night before, his name had lighted up on the big dormitory board: **DAVID DEFOUR.**

He'd never seen it there before.

"You're it," said one of the boys with a knowing look that made him feel childish and ignorant.

"I'm what?" His eyes flicked the question from one boy to another to another. "I'm *what*?"

"You're going to be the one."

"Yes," said another.

"You're going to be punished."

"Why?"

"Because."

"*Why*?"

"Not punished, stupid," said a new voice. "Picked." The new boy, an older boy from upper dorm, put a protective arm around David's shoulder. "They picked you," he said. "You must be special."

"Picked me for what?" But the fear was growing in him, pushing his heart upward to pound and flutter in his throat. He'd heard bits and snatches of gossip before, but he'd ignored it mostly. Now it was coming back to him, but his lips had to ask it—"*What*?"

"Why, you'll be fa-mous," drawled the new boy, clutching his shoulder. "You'll have everything you want. But later on—I guess you'll have to die." The boy's eyes sought his. "I wonder what it would be like—to die."

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David thrust his small body away from the boy's restraining arm and ran on lean brown legs to the bathroom.

He wanted to empty his bladder. He wanted to cry.

It was like that now.

The Committee members, all three, wore their mole-gray robes because they were sitting in formal conclave. The tall square-faced woman who was the Chair touched a glass gavel to the soundpad before her. A tone sounded. "David Defour," said the woman, "approach the Chair."

Fear flickered across his thin face. Legs trembled. Knees wobbled.

"Don't be afraid," said the second woman, breaking protocol perhaps because she was kind and perhaps because she remembered what it was like to be eleven and frightened.

He stood before them, looking up at what seemed a great height to the seated members.

The Chair spoke again. "David Defour, do you know why you have been called before the Committee?"

He blinked, pulled in his chin, shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"Is your answer no?"

He summoned his voice, a soprano wavering. "It's no."

"Very well. Member Conway, read the Enlightenment."

Member Conway stared at David with gray steel eyes. Then he looked down and began to read:

"From the first shadows of time, humankind knew that it was mortal. For eons it strived to reach beyond itself. In one sense it failed; in another sense it succeeded magnificently. And always there was the quest.

"The quest led in many directions, meeting success and failure in each.

"Then humankind found ultimate success—and ultimate failure. Because, when humankind killed death in its laboratories, it killed the need for immortality. When death died, so did the Earth's poetry and its music. Philosophy was stilled; Art fell to dust; Science was stifled. Only the echoes remained.

"And so it was that humankind realized that great gains reflect great losses. And so it recognized the need to choose from among its members those few who, when denied their immortality, must create it for themselves to the benefit of all.

"It is for this purpose, David Defour, that you have been summoned here this day. . . ."

Member Conway pierced him with a stare. "Do you accept the

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responsibility with which humankind charges you?"

Cold winds blew through his small body, chilling his belly, creeping into his bones. He stood trembling, large eyes wide, trying to make sense of what he had heard.

The Chair said, "It is customary, David, to say 'I do'."

His mouth opened, closed, opened again. His voice vibrated in his throat, a captured bee flying out at last. "I do."

"David, I'm here to help ease the transition for you. Do you have any questions?"

He looked at the smooth bland face across the desk, trying to read it, failing—trying to make sense of the bewildering day, failing again.

After the Committee conclave, he had been taken to Medical Level, helpless, while his body was probed intimately until he felt his face grow hot with embarrassment. Sharp metal removed samples of his tissues, his blood. Then the pronouncement: *Decisional time, sixty lunar months.*

They fed him then, and gave him something to drink. He drank gratefully; the food he pushed around his bowl. Then he was brought here, to the bland-faced man with pink cheeks and skin as smooth as cream.

"You won't be staying on Vesta, David. Today you'll leave for Renascence. It's on Earth. You'll live there—" he consulted David's record, "—for sixty months—until Final Decision." The counselor absorbed the look that passed over David's face. He smiled faintly; he had seen that look before. "You'll like it there, David. Everyone does. You'll prefer it after a time. And at Renascence you'll be with your own kind."

To leave Vesta? The dormitory? Everything he ever knew? He began to shiver. He'd never known another place. They were going to take him away from his home, from the boys he thought of as brothers, from his bed, from Mother Jacobs and Mother Chin. Hot tears pushed against his lashes, held back only by determined blinking.

And his music— Were they going to take that too? Would he be wrenched away from his flute? His cythar? "Please. Let me stay. I won't be in the way."

"We can't do that, David. Tomorrow, the boys you live with begin their treatments. The food you eat, the water you drink will be different from theirs. I'm sorry, but you leave today."

A small voice quivering with despair said, "May I take my things?"

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"Mother Chin packed for you. Everything is on board the skiptor now." In answer to the dart of hope in the boy's eyes, the counselor added. "It's all there, David. Your musical instruments, too. Especially those. And you'll find more at Renascence. Much more." He rose abruptly. "Now I think we'd better get you aboard. It's a long trip."

"But I can't go yet. I have to say goodbye."

"No, David. We've found that it's better to make the break clean and quick."

He huddled alone in an enclosed compartment in the skiptor. When the door closed, he stared at it bleakly for a few minutes and then gave way to tears.

The flightman, watching his console, took note and wisely let him cry for a while before he pressed the tone button and activated the boy's viewer.

"Hello, David. I'm Heintz. I'll be here to help you through the trip," said the voice from the screen. "If you'll look to the right of your compartment, you'll see a button marked *water* and another marked *juice*. I recommend the juice. It's pretty good."

He *was* thirsty. He pressed the button and a drinking tube oozed out of the wall. It was good. It quenched his thirst.

Heintz waited until the mild sedative had taken effect. Then he said, "Ever ride a skiptor before?"

David shook his head.

"The captain has just come aboard, David. We'll be leaving in a few minutes. I'll tune your screen so you can see departure, but first I want you to engage the webbing. Press the lever in front of you."

A green light came on under his nose; below it, a small handle protruded. He pushed it and gossamer-light webbing emerged from the compartment walls and enfolded him gently but firmly, leaving only his arms free.

"Good. When we're underway, you can disengage on my signal. In the meantime, feel free to explore your compartment. If you want me, press the button over your head marked *Attendant*."

The screen went blank.

Just over his head, a bank of buttons gleamed silver. One said *Music*. He pressed it and a numbered selector presented itself. Indecisively, he pushed a random code and lay back, closing his eyes. The soft strains of a plucked cythar began, followed by the swelling of a senti'cello. An arrangement of a very old piano piece, he thought. What was it? He'd heard it before in his music history class, but the

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name, the composer, eluded him. The music, inexpressibly sad, seemed to enfold him. He burrowed two brown fists in his eyes to stop the flow of warm tears, but they ran through his curved fingers and traced their way to his chin, as Beethoven's Pathetique played through its silver tape.

A light voice shocked him. "Having a cry? So are all the rest." A sigh. "How boring." A girl about his age peered at him from the visiscreen. Her eyes were frank and blue and a nutmeg sprinkle of freckles dotted her nose. "I hoped you'd be different."

"I'm not crying." He rubbed his eyes vigorously in denial. "I was about to take a nap." He yawned elaborately, sneaking a look at the girl's face. "Who are you?"

"Liss. What's *your* name?"

"David. Where are you?"

"Compartment seventeen. You're in eight."

"I thought I was alone."

The girl giggled. "Do you have a vacuum between your ears?"

The giggle made him bridle. "What do you mean?"

"You didn't think the skiptor was making a trip just for you, did you?"

"Well, no—" His chin jutted out just a bit.

"You *did*." She giggled again.

Who did she think she was, anyway? "Why don't you flash off." He reached for the privacy button.

"Wait— Don't shut me out. Wait. Please?"

The touch of panic in her voice made him stop, hand on the button.

"Please," she said, "I want to talk awhile . . . I'm lonesome."

He looked at her for a long moment. "Where are *you* going?"

"Same place you are."

"How do you know where I'm going?"

"I have ways. Wait— Hear that? We're leaving."

The subliminal hum he'd heard since boarding gave way to a heavy vibration that he felt more than heard.

"The bays are opening," she said. "Look."

The girl's face on the visiscreen shrank to a ten centimeter oval in one corner. The rest of the screen filled with a view of the massive bays of Vesta jutting into hard vacuum. A million star points pierced the black of space.

A lump formed in his throat that wouldn't swallow away. He was really going. Leaving his home—perhaps forever.

"Are you going to cry again?"

He mustered up a scoop of righteous scorn. "No."

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"Good. I don't think I could stand that. Watch— We're free."

The last vestige of the bay doors slipped away. Nothing but black and star fire now on his screen—and a ten-centimeter image of a freckle-faced girl.

"We'll be able to disengage webbing soon," she said.

"How come you know so much?" he demanded. He found her annoying and yet at the same time infinitely comforting to talk to, and he didn't quite know where to place his feelings.

"Experience," she said. "I've done all this before."

Skepticism rose. "When?"

"This morning. I was first aboard from Hoffmeir."

"Hoffmeir!"

"Yes. You didn't think they just picked from Vesta, did you?"

He shook his head. He hadn't thought about it at all.

"We stopped next at Hebe. Then we came to Vesta. This is my third departure," she said with the air of a seasoned belt-hopper.

"Oh. How many of us are there?"

"Nine, so far, in the aft compartments. Forward is full of grown-ups on business trips and vacations. I'm not interested in them. What's your talent?"

"Music."

"I'm going to be a writer. I read all the time. I've even read out of the archives. And I have an enormous vocabulary." She looked at him speculatively. "Most of the music people I've known are inordinately sensitive. Are you?"

He didn't know how to answer.

"I think you probably are, too. I expect you've been sheltered, so I'll try and take you in hand. You'll need somebody like me in Renascence."

"I don't *need* anybody."

She sighed. "I don't mean to be blunt. I just can't seem to help it. But you seem to be so helpless—"

He shut off the screen for a full five minutes until loneliness threatened to overwhelm him. He switched on the screen again, thumbing for compartment 17. "Liss?" he whispered. "Liss?"

Her face appeared—freckled, pink, and a little puffy around the eyes. Her cheeks showed tear tracks. "Are you going to talk to me, David?" she asked meekly.

"I guess so."

Her chin quivered slightly. "I'm sorry I made you mad."

"It's all right."

"I just say too much. I always have. I don't mean anything by it."

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The steady, but almost imperceptible, acceleration suddenly gave way. "Freefall," said Liss.

The compartment light came on as Heintz's voice said, "Passengers may disengage webbing."

David pulled the lever in front of him. Most of the restraining webbing retracted, leaving him with a slightly elastic tether in its place. He found he could move around freely, bounding gently off the padded walls of the little compartment. It quickly turned into a game. One, two (ceiling, wall), three, four (wall, wall), five, six (seat, wall).

He rolled himself into a ball, arms wrapped around his knees. If he pushed off the seat with his toes just so, his rump would impact on the ceiling, aiming him back to the seat. Ceiling, seat, ceiling. A little off center, he caromed toward the visiscreen. Stopped short of impact by the restraining leash, he saw Liss on the screen rebounding too, like a balloon in a wind shaft.

Heintz, watching from his console, chuckled, shaking his head. He'd never encountered a kid who didn't discover that game sooner or later. Natural-born trait, he guessed. He'd never failed to see the aftermath either.

In a few minutes, a slightly green David and a pale and sweaty Liss clung to their seats with one trembling hand while the other reached for the *Attendant* button.

"I'm way ahead of you, kids." Heintz pressed the lever for cabins eight and seventeen, and a cloud of Neutravert sprayed into the compartments. "Take slow, deep breaths." Within thirty seconds, David's nausea was gone, and so was a lot of his starch. "I think I'm going to take a nap now," he said to the image on the screen.

"Me too." And in a moment, "Night, David."

"Night, Liss."

Hands stretching out toward visiscreens as if to touch each other, they slept until time to engage the webbing for the landing on Earth.

They debarked at Atlantic-Biscayne Terminal in the middle of a hot blue morning. David's eyes, dazzled by the cut-glass reflections of the ocean, narrowed to slits. Nearby waves broke over the clear bubble-shields of the shopping centers and the econdos that had sprung up in the wake of the man-made island terminal. Miles away to the west, the skyline of Miami Beach emerged like a steel oasis from the sea.

Though it was a hot day, he shivered at the sight of the ocean. Nothing he had seen prepared him for it, nothing he had

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smelled. . . . The odor of the sea clung to his nostrils. The salt air pressed heavily on his body and seemed to resist the movement in and out of his lungs. A fine film of sweat beaded his forehead.

A woman in a blue uniform was saying something. ". . . but you'll acclimate soon. We'll proceed at once to the hover. We'll arrive at Renascence after lunch."

He saw Liss and moved toward her. She was taller than he was, bigger than he thought she'd be. Stricken with sudden shyness, he turned away and pretended to look at the ocean. After a moment, her hand took his. It felt warm and friendly to him.

On Earth-heavy legs that shook with effort after a few meters, they walked the short distance to the zontilator marked "Hover Boarding."

"This food is guckish," said Liss, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

He knew what she meant. So far, Earth food seemed wild and—well, *Earthish* compared to his diet on Vesta. And the water had a taste to it like metal.

"I guess we'll have to get used to it." Liss pushed her plate away and maneuvered herself into a more comfortable position in the hover seat next to him. Her arm pressed against his, plump and soft against his bony one. David tentatively decided that he liked it. He discovered that girls smelled different from boys, and he wondered why he'd never noticed it before. But then he hadn't paid much attention to girls up to now. He'd always found them exasperating and not worth bothering with. And Liss was certainly exasperating, but she was nice to be around too—in a way. He decided that Liss was all right. She probably wasn't a typical girl at all. He wondered if all the girls from Hoffmeir were like her.

"What was it like back home?" he asked.

"You mean compared to Vesta? Well, Hoffmeir is much smaller, of course, and newer, as you might expect of a man-made habitat, but we live inside just like you did on Vesta. And the people of Hoffmeir are ever so much more intelligent."

He faced her in surprise, pushing away her plump little arm in the process. "What are you talking about?"

"It's true. Everybody knows that Vestans are just technicians. There's variety on Hoffmeir. Why, the university alone is the best in the system. It says so in the archives. Besides, in a small select society like Hoffmeir, there's a premium on brains."

She'd almost had him fooled. She was a typical girl all right. In fact, she was so typical she was outstanding. He bet Hoffmeir was

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full of space-brained girls just like her. His voice dripped scorn, "I bet any *one* in my dorm is twice as smart as you."

"You lived in a dorm?" Her eyes widened, then crinkled at the corners. "Oh, of course."

"What do you mean, 'of course'? Where did *you* live?"

"With my parents."

He felt his mouth drop open. "Lie." She really must think he was stupid to believe a story like that. *Nobody* knew his parents until the day they welcomed him into the community of adults. A two-year-old would have better sense than to tell such a tale.

"It's not a lie. I knew Vestans weren't so intelligent, but you're proof that they're stupid."

"*I'm* stupid!"

"Yes, you are." She fumbled at her belt and drew out a little holo cube. "Look at it."

He thumbed the light on. A smiling man and woman sat at a table decorated with green Renewal Day light cubes. A girl—Liss—entered, carrying a ceremonial vinifountain. She set it down before them and the tall man drew three drinks from it. Their hands raised in a formal toast.

A three-dimensional greeting floated by:

To our daughter on this day of rejoicing.
May she find her way, and well.

David stared at the holo in disbelief.

"Now do you believe me?"

"I don't understand—" he began. "Why— How do you—" He stopped, not knowing how to phrase all the questions in his head. Only officials and a handful of others were allowed to reproduce themselves to begin with, but they never raised the child themselves. It just wasn't done. Finally, he said, "They must be very important."

"They are." She drew her shoulders back slightly. "My father painted the official portrait of Prime Minister Gerstein. And my mother is poet-laureate of the belt—including your precious Vesta."

One eyebrow rose, questioning. "Then, if they do that, that means— That means—"

"Yes," she said. "They're mortals."

The hover suddenly plunged below the cloud cover. "Look!" Liss's nose pressed against the curving window followed quickly by

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David's. A rumpled green rug of mountains stretched below them.

The hover swooped between two mountains, skimming through a narrow pass, dipping again, following a silver curving streak that plunged down a stony gorge, finally leveling in a wild wooded valley.

David felt giddy with the flight and slightly drunk with exhilaration. Nothing he'd ever experienced, not freefall in the skiptor, not anything, compared to it.

The hover dropped again, barely missing the tree tops. The silver streak became a river bounding over the rocks in its path. Ahead, the trees thinned to a small clearing. The forward rush of the hover ceased as it began its gentle vertical drop.

There were people waiting for them.

The man who had taken him in tow said, "We want you to rest today. Rather than gather you all together to listen to boring speeches, we've arranged private orientations."

They were walking along a winding gravel path through deep woods. Alongside, a bright stream jumped from stone to stone, gurgling and chuckling its way to the river. Here and there, small wooden buildings sprouted like brown mushrooms under the trees.

The effort of walking, of drawing breaths from the heavy air, was almost too much. He felt his knees buckle. A firm hand caught him, steadied him. "Here we are." The man pushed open the door to one of the little units.

The cabin was a single room with a tiny bath just off one end. A bed cylinder lay rolled against one wall. The man pushed a lever and it opened. "Rest awhile, David. Later—" he indicated the communications bank against the opposite wall "—you'll learn more about Renascence. After you've rested, someone will come to take you to dinner."

The man smiled and ran a large hand through the boy's hair. "I know how confusing it is, David. I know how you feel."

He looked up in surprise and disbelief. No one could *really* know how he felt.

The man looked at him, but it was as if David weren't there at all for a moment. Then he said, "This was my cabin, too. Twenty-two years ago."

He was too tired, too unsettled, to sleep. Like a wooden thing, he lay on the little bed and looked dully around him. The windows were open and the warm heavy air pressed into the room bringing strange smells and sounds. Once a bird called, and he started at the

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sound of it, trying to catalogue it in his mind. The only birds on Vesta were the chickens and ducks of Sustenance Level, and the empty holo images from Education.

The sun, coming through the window, laid a rectangle of light like dusty yellow chalk in the center of the room. In the rectangle stood a graceful music stand with manuscripts arranged on it. His own cythar and his flute sat next to the stand. He felt grateful for them, as if they represented a continuity in his life.

Across the room, attached to the communications bank, was a triple keyboard. Did it have amplifier bars? Curiosity propelled him to his feet and across the room. Amplifier bars. He couldn't believe it. There was only one symphosizer on Vesta that could compare with it. His own—the one they'd let him use—was like a toy compared to this one.

He stood before it, fingers poised, afraid to touch it, but tempted beyond redemption. He pressed the control marked "soloboe," and played a fragment of melody that had run through his head for a while. The symphosizer echoed in a plaintive reedy voice. "Remember," he said under his breath, pressing the "store" control. The bassoon was next, no—two bassoons—rollicking drolly in the lower registers. "Now. Together." The trio echoed in the little room. David, listening critically, pressed "delay," then the code for bassoon I and II. "Repeat," he said to himself. Better, he thought, dark eyes shining at the sound filling the cabin. Better. He stored it all, marveling at the intricacies of the symphosizer. It could cut out dozens of mechanical, uncreative steps. No more delays between the idea and the realization.

He activated the bassoon voices again, playing one against the other in an argument. The voices rose and he giggled at the strident duck squawks. Now a chase— A crash. A cartoon ending—two irate bassoons with duck mouths—tumbling over and over each other, protesting wildly until they were out of breath, their squawks subsiding to disgruntled, infrequent quacks.

An idea came. He held the sensor to his throat and sub-vocaled, "Duck-eater, duck-eater, duck-eater, duck-eater." He pressed an amplifier bar, sighing it . . . *d--u--c--k--e--a--t--e--r.* Now, chop it . . . *d'd'd'd'K--e--a--t--e--r.*

He played with the controls until he had his monster galumphing after the bassoon ducks. It started with a flat-footed walk in the lower registers: *D'D' Kuh.* Ominous. He keyed in the ducks in a low-pitched quack.

D'D' Kuh, D'D' Kuh.

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Then a sighing, *e--a--t--t--t.*

Roll it down seventeen tones—*E--a--t--e--r-r-r!*

D'D'Kuh.

Nervous duck quacks, and then the chase: *D'D'Kuh. E--a--t--e-r-r-KUK---smeer-PING.*

It ended with a deliciously horrible duck scream and the monster's sighing, *E---a---t--t--t.*

Visions of swirling duck feathers floated in his head. Tickled at the image he'd evoked, he laughed out loud.

"Good afternoon, David," said a male voice from the communicator.

Startled, he looked up.

"We're going to begin your orientation now. Watch the viewer, please."

The image of a satellite map came on the viewer. "The skiptor landed here . . ." An enlargement of the map, then the scene at Biscayne-Atlantic. "You boarded the hover and arrived here." The green mountains appeared—pinpointed on the satmap. "You are in an area known as the Blood Mountain Wilderness, part of the North American continent once known as Georgia. The wilderness area is over 4000 square kilometers, of which Renascence is allowed the use of 180 square kilometers." The image focused on a small area.

David recognized the brown cabins near the landing site.

"You are here, in dwelling six."

Actual images gave way to a stylized map showing study center, dining halls and a large recreational lake. At the edge of the lake, a series of performance halls were displayed.

"You'll soon learn your way around, David. Now, we want to tell you a little about Renascence. You were brought here, as were the others, with very little information about this operation. This is the way it was planned. We want each of you to discover for yourself what our life is like. Although your arrival was abrupt, and your discomfort acute, it has enabled you to look at your new life without preconceived attitudes and prejudices.

"We live a simple life here. Simple, but enriching. You will find complexity enough in your work and in the interactions with your teachers and your peers. This, too, is deliberate. We have sought to form an environment conducive to creativity and one which, we hope, simulates an earlier, simpler time when all humankind faced an abbreviated life span.

"While you are here, you will learn more than the discipline of your art. At Renascence, you will learn a reverence for the ideas

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and the cultures which humankind has pursued throughout its history.

"Each of you has received a Final Decision time. In your case, David, the time is sixty lunar months. In sixty months, if you decide not to remain with us, you may make your Final Decision for immortality treatments. Beyond that time, your body will have matured too much for treatments to begin.

"We, of course, hope that during your stay here you will choose to remain. However, if you decide to leave us, there will be no reproaches, and no disgrace whatsoever.

"You will be meeting your teachers soon, David. If you have questions, the communicator will answer them."

The voice fell silent.

A sharp tap on the door, and then it opened. "I'm exploring," said Liss closing the door behind her.

"How did you know where I was?"

"Easy. I asked the communicator. Come here and I'll show you where I'm staying." She pointed out the window to the creek, nearly hidden beyond a clump of dark graceful trees. "See those trees? The communicator says they're hemlocks. Anyway, just beyond, there's a little foot bridge. After you cross, there's a path right to my door." She giggled. "It's a little like the witch's house in Hansel and Gretel, don't you think?"

He looked at her blankly.

She searched his face and sighed. "Don't you know anything about mythology?" She shook her head. "Technicians. Well, I'll just have to take you in hand and—" She stopped. "I'm doing it again, aren't I? I'm sorry. Please don't squinch your face up at me like that. It gives me the wooly-woolies."

She seemed so distressed, and so sincere, he felt his face relax and a smile grow there. "All right."

"I really would like to tell you about Hansel and Gretel though. That is," she added quickly, "if you want to hear it."

"Well, go ahead then."

"Oh, not now. Tonight. It's a bedtime story. Show me your things," she said. She pointed to the symphosizer. "What's that?"

He told her how it worked.

"Interesting," she admitted. "Then you can work two ways just like I can."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, my cabin has a processor on the communicator. I can use that to write, but in the middle of the room, about where that music

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stand of yours is, sits the funniest thing. It's a tall piece of furniture with a slopey top. And it has a *stool* drawn up to sit on."

"What are you supposed to do *there*?" he asked.

"Write." She watched for his reaction, giggling when the puzzlement spread over his face. "There's a stack of paper and pens on the desk. Can you imagine something so primitive? I asked the communicator about it. Did you know that in the olden days lots of writers actually wrote that way?"

He shook his head.

"I think I might try it. It's rather romantic, don't you think? Anyway, I see that you have the same arrangement here." She walked up to the music stand. "What's this?"

David examined the sheets. Some were blank except for the musical staff printed on them. Others were compositions for cythar and for flute.

"How does this sound?" asked Liss, picking up a sheet at random.

He looked at it in surprise; it was titled, "David's Song." The composer was somebody called T. Rolfe. He fitted his flute together and began to play, slowly at first, for it was a difficult piece, then faster, more fluently as he began to feel the mood of the music.

"That's beautiful," said Liss as he finished.

"I agree," said the woman at the door who had entered unnoticed. "I can't imagine it played with more feeling."

David looked up with a flush of pleasure. The pleasure died when he saw her, and cold things crept on spider legs in his belly.

The woman was old. Old in a way that David had never seen. She was small and stooped. Wise dark eyes burned from a face encased in wrinkled, wilted flesh. Her hair fluttered in wild gray-white strands around her head. Sagging skin made jaw and throat a continuous webbed mass. He shuddered.

"I heard you playing the song I wrote for you," she said, "and so I stopped in. I'm going to be your teacher, David."

While he stood dumbly by, Liss said, "Oh, then you're T. Rolfe."

"Tanya."

"Will David learn to write music like you?"

The old woman smiled, increasing tenfold the wrinkles wreathing her face, cornering her mouth and her eyes. "We'll see."

When she'd gone, David still stood silent, contemplating the apparition of age.

"She's nice," said Liss. "Don't you think so?"

He looked at her, stricken. "She's— She's ugly."

"She's just old," said Liss. "She must be nearly a hundred."

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Nearly a hundred! Smooth-faced Mother Chin at his dormitory was nearly two hundred. Mother Jacobs was older yet. He felt his jaw clench. "How can they do it? How can they?"

She touched his shoulder, patted it. "I'm sorry. I forgot. You've never seen mortals before, have you?"

He shook his head miserably. Then he looked at her for a long time. "You're not afraid of it, are you, Liss?"

Surprise flickered over her face. "Why, no. I guess I'm not. And now," she said briskly, "I suggest we investigate supper. I expect it will be guckish, but right now, I don't even care."

Later that night, he lay alone in his cabin, as miserable and skittish as a pup away from its litter mates for the first time. Far away, an owl called. Nearby, another answered. Startled, he sat up, looking through the window into deep shadows and moonlight. Nothing stirred.

Uneasily, he lay back. He wanted to be home, tucked into his bed in the middle row between Jeremy and Martin, lulled by soft snores and muffled sleep sounds. He wouldn't stay here. He wouldn't. Not even if they *tortured* him.

Slowly exhaustion and sleep overtook him.

He dreamed of walking alone in brooding woods. After a time, he knew that he was lost. He panicked and began to run until he came to a clump of trees and a foot bridge over the creek. His feet thrumming on the little path, he ran, calling "Liss. Liss." The door to the cabin—the wicked witch's house—fell open. Tanya Rolfe stood in the doorway beckoning with hands like claws.

He stirred and muttered in his sleep. Outside his window an owl swooped on silent wings, its talons pinioning a small gray mouse.

INTERLUDE

David stared at the corrections Tanya Rolfe had made on his composition. It wasn't any use. In the three years he'd been on the Earth, he'd never got back a score without those hated corrections. He crumpled the sheets in his hand and threw them to the floor.

The old woman shook her head slowly. "David, David. You are here to learn. You *are* learning, but you are like a young plant not yet grown. It's too soon to expect a harvest."

Too soon, always too soon. He waited for her next line.

"You must crawl before you can walk, David. Walk, before you

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can run." The old woman looked at him sharply, then she laughed. "You hate my platitudes nearly as much as my corrections."

His chin jutted defiantly.

"Oh, David. You're always so impatient. We can only lay a foundation here. Your music has to grow—to mature as you mature. It may take half a lifetime before you compose something of enduring value. Perhaps longer. Perhaps never."

She touched the communicator controls and received another print-out of his piece. "Let's start again, David, from this measure. Now this is a good beginning, but you take it nowhere. . . ."

He heard her voice going over the piece, but her words didn't register. What she'd said before kept repeating itself in his brain:

Half a lifetime. Perhaps longer. Perhaps never.

II

He tapped at the door of Tanya Rolfe's cottage. There was a sound of chair scraping against floor, then a voice, "Come in."

The wrinkled face moved in a smile. "Good morning, David. I've been expecting you to come by to see me."

"But how? Today isn't my lesson."

"No." The dark eyes looked at him keenly. "But most of my boys and girls come when they reach this point. Come and sit with me, David. Have a cup of tea." She took his firm hand in hers, drew him to a chair, and poured strong tea from a thin old china pot.

The odor of sassafras and lemon rose from the cup. It seemed to him as he sipped from it that Tanya Rolfe was like her teapot—crazed and fragile with age, but filled with good strong stuff that warmed him.

"Your Final Decision comes soon, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "Tomorrow."

"So soon?" She sighed deeply, her breath running out in reedy tones. "I thought a month, perhaps, or two. So soon." A veil seemed to come over her eyes for a moment, a fleeting look of vulnerability.

He wondered that he'd missed it before. How had he missed seeing how fragile she'd become the last few years? Her hand on the cup was translucent porcelain, patterned with thin blue veins. In dismay, he realized that he'd not really *seen* her before. He hadn't heard the faint rattle of air as it moved in and out of her lungs. Hadn't noticed the swelling of instep and ankle above her tiny feet. Hadn't seen the effort in her movements. He clenched his fist, feeling nails bite into his palm.

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She set down the cup and took his hand in hers, opening it, relaxing the curved fingers. "You want to know what will happen to your music if you decide to leave us."

He nodded.

"You're a highly skilled musician, David. You have technique that can improve with time and maturity. You have talent, too. You're musical. But you have something more—" She paused, looking through the window at something that lay far beyond the scope of her eyes. "It's something called 'The Divine Discontent.' *I* think of it as a yearning to move outside of myself—to be a part of something more, something greater, and yet to still be uniquely Tanya Rolfe.

"It's the discontent of a sapient wave lapping on a beach, shifting the sands, and knowing that when it is gone, another will wipe out all traces of its path. And it feels rage—" A touch of passion edged her voice. "Rage." Then she laughed softly. "Some call it the thumbscratch syndrome."

He looked at her, puzzled.

"We're transients too. Like the waves, our comings and goings change the face of the earth. But it isn't enough. We feel the need to personally scratch the face of eternity—deep enough to leave a scar. Proof, you see, that we've been here."

"And if I'm *always* going to be here—"

"Then, there goes your motivation. Immortality is a sure cure for the thumbscratch syndrome."

"But if I did—"

"You'd still be clever, David. And competent. But you'd be striking a cooling iron. And after a while, it wouldn't matter to you."

He nodded, stood, walked to the door, then turned. "Has it always happened like that? Is it for sure?"

"I can't say that the spark *must* go out. But it always has, David." Her hand, gentle as a moth, touched his shoulder. "It always has."

He moved up the hill, feeling his leg muscles strain, feeling his breath come in short gasps. Sunlight, filtering the new leaves of May, dappled the spongy forest floor beneath his feet.

He sought a high crest, a place where he could overlook Renascence. He wanted to see it all, for once. If he could see it all, maybe he could make it fit together in his mind.

He stepped over a rotting tree trunk in his path and froze. Glittering death coiled by his foot. He heard the warning rattle with only part of his brain. Another part observed, actively orchestrating

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his fear . . . a rattling maraca; a tom-tom mimicking the beat of his heart. Accelerando. Silence. A silence whimpering in his mind at 440 cycles per second—increasing to a scream—ten thousand cycles, twenty, more. Pulsating beyond the audible range. Felt.

If it struck, if its fangs entered a vein, an artery, he was too far from help.

His muscles contracted. He sprang, running through the open woods to a raucous brass accompaniment in his head, running with a tom-tom throbbing against his chest, his throat.

Had it struck? Would he feel it, if it had?

Reason told him he was safe; fear thrust him ahead. His muscles propelled him on. He ran until his body rebelled and withdrew his strength and his breath. He fell in a heap at the foot of a wide oak, leaning his back against it for support.

"Coward," he said aloud to himself when he had breath. "Coward." But part of him rankled in defense. What else could he do? He didn't want to die.

He didn't want to die.

He made his way back down the mountain to the stream by the clearing. A tall reed-thin boy pressed wet clay in spiraling shapes on a flat stone emerging from the shallow water. He looked up. "Ah, David. Been up the mountain?"

It was more than a casual phrase. Sooner or later, nearly everyone made that trek, alone—as if it were a biological need like food or water, as if the mountain held answers that the valley couldn't. David nodded. "Been up the mountain, M'kumbe."

"Does the air breathe softer there?" The tension in the question revealed itself in the long black fingers kneading the slick clay.

He didn't know how to answer.

The black eyes looked into his, the fingers moved. "I build my own—here." The lump of clay rose against the pressure of the boy's hands and grew ridged like a naked spine against the rock. "It rises, it falls. I can be a god to this little mountain. But in the end, it's only clay." He brought down his fist, smashing the earthen spine. Then he smoothed it into a flat cake, blending it with pale pink palms and long black fingers, bisecting it with a curving 'S.' "Up and down. Yin and Yang." The fingers stopped for a moment. "Liss is looking for you. She's looked all morning."

He found her in her cabin, sitting on the old tall stool in front of her desk, writing.

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"A poem?" he asked.

"A letter. To myself." She wrote a few moments longer, then laid the pen down and looked up. "It's a thought-straightener."

"Three people told me you wanted to talk to me."

"I do. But right now, let's walk." She slipped off the stool and picked up a small split oak basket that sat in the corner of the room. "The blackberries are out." She swept out of the cabin and was halfway over the foot bridge before he caught up with her.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She looked at a point just over his head, as if she found it of utmost importance.

He took her shoulders, turning her toward him. "What's wrong, Liss?"

She twisted the little basket from side to side in her hand. "Nothing. I've just developed a taste for blackberries." Her chin thrust defiantly, but she avoided his eyes. "I like them so well, in fact, that I've decided I want to eat them forever."

His hands slowly dropped to his sides. He leaned up against the railing of the little bridge, trying to think. Of all the people here, Liss had been the most sure.

Her lips turned up at the corners, but her eyes didn't match. "There's an old saying, David: 'It's a woman's prerogative to change her mind.' Ever heard it?"

He shook his head.

A slight crinkle grew around her eyes. "Technician." And then the old joke, "I'm going to have to take you in hand."

They began to walk. They walked for quite awhile before they came to the rambling patch of blackberry bushes, before he said, "Why, Liss?"

Her hands flew among the brambles, picking soft ripe berries, staining the basket and her fingers purple. Without answering, she reached for a cluster deep within a bush, and with a little cry, drew out her hand, empty. A deep scratch curved across the skin, and tiny drops of blood appeared here and there, merging into a red line. She began to cry, all out of proportion to the hurt, shoulders heaving, little snub nose turning red and snuffly.

He watched her, feeling utterly helpless.

The basket fell to the ground, spilling berries into the grass, and still she cried, curving her hands into fists. And then, between breathless racking sobs, she said, "Don't you know anything? Don't you know *anything*?"

He stood accused, not knowing of what.

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"Technician." She drew in a huge snuffling breath. "You're supposed to comfort me. It says so in all the books."

Dismayed, he reached out awkwardly and patted her head, ruffling her soft hair under his fingers.

Unaccountably, she began to laugh. It started halfway between a giggle and a gasp. Then it grew to madhouse proportions, until she had to sit down in the warm new grass. It was infectious and he found himself on the ground beside her, laughing too. Hugging her, laughing, then kissing in a heap of scattered blackberries. And it seemed to him then that maybe they were both crazy, but it didn't matter.

Tossing their clothes in a purple-stained tangle, they clung together, rolling on the soft warm ground, pressing together with cool flesh and frantic need. Later, laughing at the purple stains on their bodies, they ran naked down the path to the lake and plunged into the frigid, heart-stopping water.

After they dressed, they walked in the sunlight, briskly at first, trying to warm up. They took the high path back along the broad back of a ridge. Below them, they could see the clearing.

In the sharp blue sky, a line grew to the shape of a disc. "Look," said Liss. "The hover. Let's watch."

The hover stopped its forward surge and dropped gently to the floor of the valley. The doors opened, disgorging a cargo of seven children.

"Do you remember the day we came, David?"

He nodded, watching the little group. One boy stood apart from the rest, shoulders back, legs slightly apart, looking braver than he could possibly feel. Another looked around with eyes as big as the landscape he tried to take in. They seemed so little.

She echoed his thoughts. "Were we ever that small?"

"I suppose we were."

"It must have been harder for you," she said. "You were plucked out of a dormitory and brought here. I never lived that way—there were just me and my parents. I was used to being alone back at home. But, you know, I think you did better than I did." She sat down, drawing her arms around her knees. "I've found out that I need people around me. You found out that you didn't."

He felt an eyebrow raise.

She laughed, crinkling her nose at him. "Well," she said coyly, "*sometimes* you need people. But most of the time you're buried in that cabin of yours like an ingrown nail in a toe."

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"Is that your poetic opinion?"

"It may not be poetic, but it is decidedly my opinion. I don't think you know half of what goes on here."

"Such as what?"

Her eyes clouded. "Did you know Tanya Rolfe is dying?"

The words caught him like a fist in the stomach. "How do you know?" But he was remembering how frail she'd looked that morning, remembering the sound of her breath slipping from her lungs.

"I had to rewrite her obituary."

The word puzzled him.

"Her death-notice. It's an old custom in journalism—the writers still observe it here. When someone is important, we keep an obituary in the communicator in case they die suddenly. Hers was out of date. Her new conserere had to be added to it, and several sonatas.

"They told me to do it right away. Anyway, you know how I can't seem to keep from meddling—" She looked up at him. "One question seemed to bring up another, so I coded the communicator for her medical file."

"Is that why you decided to—eat blackberries forever?"

She shook her head. "Not really." She reached her hand up to him. "Help me up. Walk me back to my cabin and I'll show you."

He reached out a hand to her and pulled her to her feet. They walked down the curving path, not talking, not feeling the need to talk, until they came to the old foot bridge that led to Liss's cabin.

"We didn't get any blackberries, did we?" she said at last, looking at the empty stained basket.

"You'll have a long time for that."

"Will you?"

He pushed open the door to the cabin, striding ahead of her. "I don't know."

She walked to the tall desk and rummaged through a stack of papers, drawing one out. "Read this."

"Your letter to yourself?"

She shook her head. "A poem."

He read, thrumming the cadences with fingers tapping against his knee.

"What do you think?" she asked when he finished. "Be honest."

"I'm always honest," he said.

"I know you are. That's why I wanted you to read it."

"But I'm not a poet."

She sank into a chair next to him and stared at the wide planked floor.

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He looked at her for a moment, then he said, "It seems to be quite good. Technically, you've done well and your imagery is—"

"Pedestrian."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't need to. I can see it in your face."

"I told you I'm not a poet."

"Neither am I." She took the paper from him and folded it in half, creasing the edges with a thumbnail. "I'm a little slow. It took me a long time to find out. But, now that I know, there's no point in drawing it out, is there?"

He considered his words carefully. Then he said, "You have to give yourself time, Liss. We all do. It doesn't come all at once."

"I *have* decided to give myself time. All the time in the world."

"Are you sure?"

"I've thought about it a lot. I'm glib. I'm clever. I have a knack with words. That doesn't make me a poet, David. Not even a fledgling poet. It just isn't there. If I could live forever and not lose whatever creative drive I have—it still wouldn't be enough. I could write until this cabin fell away to dust—" She swept her arm toward the window, "—until these mountains crumbled. And it wouldn't matter." Her face twisted. "It's not easy to finally admit to yourself what should have been obvious."

He pulled her to him awkwardly, cradling her head against his shoulder. "What are you going to do now?"

After a few minutes, she sat up. "I have nearly a month to go before my Final Decision, but that won't change anything." She looked at him sharply. "I can still write, you know. Derivative stuff, non-fiction, so on. I suppose I'll do that. I'm basically a compiler anyway. I'm good at it. Not many people are."

She stood up, smoothing her clothes. Then she walked to the tiny dispenser, punched a lever, and extracted two containers of juice. "In a way, it's a relief. I don't have to prove myself anymore." She handed him one and drank deeply from the other. "I don't have to do anything, except *be*."

He fingered the juice container, wondering what to say to her, saying nothing.

She sat down beside him. "It's funny the way things work out, isn't it?" Her face moved in a wispy little smile. "I never thought it would turn out that *I'd* be the technician."

Liss ate with a good appetite, while David rearranged his food, absently pushing it into ridges and furrows, eating none.

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She chided him. "You're as thin as a spar, now. If you fall away any more, the ants will carry you off."

His face quirked into a smile, but he couldn't eat.

After dinner as the evening sun slipped away in purple shadows, they walked to the open concert hall cantilevered over the lake shore.

"Have you heard any of it, yet?" she asked.

He shook his head. "She wouldn't let me see the score." He was going to hear Tanya Rolfe's "Summer Conserere" for the first time that night, and he was acutely aware that it was to be her last work.

They took seats near the rear. Beyond the stage, the last colors of evening blazed pink above the mountains at the far edge of the lake.

"That was planned, you know," said Liss admiring the sunset. "The visiographer is Lindner. I think he's a genius. Nobody else can combine nature and artifice like he can."

The stage rose silently before them, bearing the conductor and the small orchestra. A hush—then a measured chorus of cicadas began, answered by the flickering lights of a hundred fireflies.

The chorus increased ten-fold, as the tiny fireflies became ten thousand points of light wheeling slowly across the darkening sky in constellations of cold fire.

A symphosizer sighed once, then a chorus of wind whispering through new leaves became a theme uttered by a single soloboe.

David felt himself swept away by the music and the subtle changing effects in the sky around him. In turn, he felt love, then grief and a heavy sense of loss, then hope. A throbbing of strings and colors began, so delicate he felt it as pain in the tightness of his throat. Then silence. Black. Night, until a single point of light—a shooting star—grew to a great ball of fire and a swelling chorus of exultation.

He felt tears rise in his eyes and blinked to keep them back. He felt vaguely ashamed of them, and yet they were echoed by bright eyes everywhere in the audience. He joined with the others in applause, rubbing his hands together slowly at first, then more briskly. The leathery rustle of appreciation grew in speed and then the ultimate compliment—spontaneously, the audience began the rhythmic, sighing breathing that symbolized an inspired performance. In . . . spired. Containing the breath of life.

A single light focused on the slight figure of Tanya Rolfe. She came onto the stage on the arm of Lindner, the visiographer, walking slowly with a halting step. She stood with her head flung back as

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if to take in more air.

The rhythmic breathing increased in tempo until David's fingers tingled and he felt quite giddy. Next to him, Liss sighed, fluttering on the edge of consciousness. Here and there, people in the audience toppled, overcome by the hyperventilation. And still it went on, until Tanya Rolfe signalled to Lindner and the two walked slowly off the stage.

He left Liss at the path near her cabin.

"You want to be alone?"

He nodded.

"I understand." She kissed him lightly and turned away, then stopped, saying, "David, we've been friends. That's important, isn't it?" She looked at him once again. "Will you tell a friend—when you decide?"

He kissed her then. They clung together like two lost things for a minute or two and then she gently pushed him away, and without saying goodbye, walked away toward the little foot bridge.

He wandered alone for a while, not noticing where he was going. He found himself near Tanya Rolfe's cabin. A light still shone through the window.

He tapped lightly on the door, got no answer, tapped again. The door was unlocked and he pushed it open.

Still dressed, she lay on her bed. Her eyes were closed. For a shattering moment, he thought she was dead. Then a thin whistling breath escaped from her lungs.

He stood watching her, wanting to wake her, not wanting to. She was like a candle, nearly spent, guttering out with a final glow—defying the night.

He stood for a long time, looking at the tracks of time on her face and body. The tears he'd kept back at the concert rolled down his face. "Was it worth it?" he whispered. "Was it worth it?"

He left her cabin, shutting the door softly behind him. He had until tomorrow morning, then Final Decision. Final. No turning back. No changing his mind from that point on.

He walked in the dark for an hour or two, trying to gather himself into one piece and failing. Moonlight glittered on the black lake and the trees cast shadows of ink. He felt tired and a little disoriented. There was a place up ahead where he could rest.

The path curved to the tiny wood building they called the chapel. He pushed the door open and went in. He'd never bothered with it

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before, but he knew that some of the others had.

He sat back in the dim room looking down on a small dark arena. The bench he sat on was made of wood with a hard curving back. In front of him lay a bank of controls. He pressed one at random.

The arena took on a pale blue cast and a three-dimensional hexagram formed. A soft, almost subliminal voice said, "The Star of David." A man with a long white flowing beard clutched two stone tablets. David watched awhile, not really listening as the voice purred on, ". . . Thou shalt not kill."

Thou shalt not kill.

If he stayed, wasn't that what he'd be doing? To himself? A shiver rippled down his back. He pressed the controls.

A circle moved before him—yin and yang—as divided as his mind.

Another button. A cross—with a man pinioned to it. Helpless as a butterfly on a board. Suffering eyes.

Another button. A sunflower, yellow petals opening.

Another. A serpent coiled itself into a figure eight.

Confused, he pressed his hand over the controls to shut it off, but instead he disengaged the speed. Below him, the scenes changed like shifting crystals in a kaleidoscope. The sunflower melting into a crescent with a star . . . the star flowing into the hexagram . . . unfolding into a cross . . . melting serpent gliding across the face of a yellow flower. All the while, soft voices whispering, ". . . Allah . . . illusion . . . shalt not kill. . . ."

He ran. He ran until the cool night air swept away the shifting scenes in his head.

Back in his cabin with no hope of sleep, he dialed a communicator code. Prints began to tumble out of the machine—a dozen, two dozen, more. . . . The complete works of Tanya Rolfe.

He tuned his cythar and began to play what he could of her music. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, he played, his fingers moving from one set of strings to the other, leaping the ninety-degree angle easily.

Only as he played did his mind relax. No thoughts flickered consciously, but the undercurrent sang from the plucked strings. She wouldn't die, she couldn't die, as long as her music played.

She wouldn't die, she couldn't die. Only when he stopped did he think of his own body falling away in sagging ripples of flesh, falling away to nothing. Only when he stopped did he think of his music and how it would die while he lived on in smooth-muscled emptiness.

He played until his fingers bled, and then he set aside his cythar and fitted his flute together.

He fingered through the copies of her music, leaving little smears

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of blood on the pages. Then he came to the title-page of her last conserere.

He read:

SUMMER CONSERERE
by
Tanya Rolfe

And below that, the dedication:

To David Defour, who lives on.

Why hadn't she told him? Why hadn't she? He felt a lump grow in his throat that was too hard and dry for tears.

He looked at the inscription knowing that the meaning could be taken two ways, knowing also that it could have had only one meaning to Tanya Rolfe. And he knew, too, why she hadn't told him.

She knew he had to decide for himself.

When the night faded to shades of gray, he left the cabin carrying only a thin set of pan-pipes and a small recording device slung on his belt.

Exhaustion had brought its own kind of peace. Spent, he sank down at the foot of a wide beech tree near the clearing. The first glow of the new sun began to color the hills.

He crushed a blade of grass with his sore fingers, rolling it between them, inhaling its sharp sweet smell.

It was good to be alive. What would it be like to *not be*? To not find out what lay beyond the next day? To not see Thursday? To never slide down the hills of April?

A rabbit rustled at the edge of the blackberry patch, nibbled tentatively at a blade of grass, thrust cut-velvet ears in his direction. He felt pity for it. It was so small, so ephemeral. Its moments fleeted as he watched.

But it had to be what it was.

He reached for the pan-pipes and blew a melody in a minor key to the little creature. It was a theme, he remembered, from Beethoven. He didn't know just why the theme seemed important to him, but somehow it did. Somehow, it told him of the end of things—and of beginnings. The melody hung in the warm sweet air for a moment, and somehow that moment seemed a bit more alive to him.

Then the ideas, the variations, came tumbling out of his pan-

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pipes. He laughed and touched the tiny recorder slung from his hip. And in his mind he could hear the orchestration—swelling strings, then the theme whispered from a flute, answered by a kleidelphone, echoed by the dark double reeds. Now a muttered tympani, a variation by Weidner horn. It was all there. It was all there because it was his lot to create.

And he realized suddenly that he was outrageously hungry. No wonder. It was getting late. It was time for him to tell them he was going to stay at Renascence—but only if they'd give him breakfast.

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LETTERS

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Other correspondence with Davis Publications, Inc., for the attention of the Advertising Department, Newsstand Circulation Department, and so on, should be addressed to Davis Publications, Inc., Attention: (whichever department you are corresponding with), 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

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Dear Mr. Scithers,

I'm afraid that when I first saw the August issue of *IA'sfm,* I cringed. That cover painting was . . . well . . . an old-fashioned sort of cover, shall we say.

Now, however, after reading the magazine, and pondering, and pondering, I have come to the conclusion that it is a good cover. It typifies your magazine.

I don't mean to say that *IA'sfm* is old-fashioned. Rather, you regard SF as fun, while taking it seriously at the same time. You obviously enjoy editing the 'zine, and it is very enjoyable to read, even when the stories are serious and sad. This cover by Schomburg immediately telegraphs to the potential buyer that this is a fun magazine to read, that there is no stodgy, serious-SF atmosphere here. The only people put off by such work are those who view themselves as serious students of the genre, people like myself. Keep running those covers; they keep our hearts in the right place.

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The only other comments this month concern the contents. "Where Are You, Stephanie Tobin?" by Juleen Brantingham was excellent, as was Pohl's "The Cool War." I heartily support your policy of running a novella or long novelette at the end of each issue.

Yours in enjoyable science fiction,

Tony Trull
St. Louis MO

George does *enjoy editing the magazine. Even the occasional crises do not dim the glow of happiness he exudes wherever he goes these days.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs,

You'll be pleased to know that you magazine has reached even to Australia, along with another world-shattering (literally), if short-lived, product of American technology (Skylab). I first saw *IA'sfm* in a science fiction bookshop about a year ago (June 1978), and took a few months to decide to subscribe. Eventually, in November last year, I did subscribe, expecting my subscription to last 12 months. I have since resubscribed. Mr. Davis will be happy to know that I bought the magazine on the strength of the Good Doctor's name.

I am a second-year medical student, aged 18, and have been reading almost exclusively science fiction since the age of 10, when I discovered the *Foundation* series in the school library. In my final year of school, two years ago, I tried to convert my English teacher away from her hostility towards SF by showing her that such a thing as the didactic SF story exists, in the form of "An Immortal Bard," by Dr. Asimov (anybody who hasn't read this story should do so). Unfortunately, she took the story as a personal insult. Still, it was her loss, not science fiction's.

Now for something completely different. The mailing cover of the magazine is not sturdy enough, so my magazines arrive slightly battered—perhaps you could use an envelope, like *F & SF*. Aside from that, and the long waiting time for the magazine (about 2 months after release), the magazine is nearly everything one could wish for in an SF magazine. The finish is excellent for a non-slick—especially the fact that the text is in one column, and in a large print, which makes it easy on the eye.

The June issue was very enjoyable, especially "Scoop," due to its

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solid scientific basis in Swarzchild radii, and "Storming the Bijou, Mon Amour," for its humour (note the spelling).

I would like to help you *pun*ish your readers with plays on words. To this end, I have enclosed an International Postal Reply Coupon so as to obtain from you your manuscript instructions. [Done![

Finally, even though I know Dr. Asimov hates to be reminded of his age, I wish him *mazel tov* for his approaching 60th birthday on January 2, 1980. I'm looking forwards to another 60 years of his work.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Wein
6 Chaddesley Ave.
Balaclava, Victoria 3183
Australia

You're only as old as you feel, and I feel as skillfully as ever.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor;

As a charter subscriber, and an SF fan for twenty of my twenty-nine years, you will understand that it takes a lot for me to get really excited about a story. Yet, I had to write to tell you that "Enemy Mine" by Barry B. Longyear, was one of the best short stories in memory. It deserves not only nomination, but selection for every major prize to be awarded for 1979. It was worth the price of subscription.

And speaking of subscriptions, I unfortunately had a little hassle regarding my recent renewal (it seems that the computer was playing tricks again). I was floored to receive an *actual letter* from a *human person* in response to my request to resolve the dispute, instead of the anticipated computer-generated form letter.

You care in selecting stories (and the care in dealing with subscribers) makes your magazine the best available. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Gary D. Simms
Chevy Chase MD

Davis Publications is widely-known as a collection of charming human beings, from Joel all the way down.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Mr. Scithers,

The August Issue of *IA'sfm* got off to a good start with Barry Longyear's "Dreams." While I always enjoy his tales about the planet Momus, it is nice to know that Barry can do as fine a job on a different kind of story. As I read, I couldn't help wondering how much of it was autobiographical. I am glad that you finally got around to doing a portrait of Alex Schomburg, who, in my opinion, is the best science fiction illustrator around today. I loved all of the illustration he did for this issue. "C.O.D." by Jonathan Milos, was great, and "Itch on the Bull Run" was a fine sequel to the previous tale. Frederik Pohl's "The Cool War" was very good, and was well worth the loss of the letters column. Although *IA'sfm* is famous for giving new authors a chance to break into the science fiction business, it is always nice to see a piece by an old master like Mr. Pohl. On the other hand, although "Stone Crucible" was not a bad story, for some reason I did not enjoy it as much as I did the other stories in this issue and "Doo-Dah Chemistry" was, unfortunately, one of the worst entries in the pun series to date.

Sincerely yours,

Michael J. Mitchell
Route 2, Box 7A
Cameron, TX 76520

Fred Pohl is indeed an old master. He's a few weeks older than I am, ha, ha.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac and George,

Since you seem to work so very well together, I hope that you both have no objection to first names. If I am wrong, please forgive me.

At the first opportunity I opened the September, 1979, *IA'sfm* to the letters section and found myself in full agreement with Patricia Kaspar's comment re "On Kepler, Newton & Co." Finished, I thought, with the 'old business,' I turned to the editorial (both informative to us novices in SF and very enjoyable), "The Backward Look" (somewhat contrived?), "Jenning's Operative Webster" (well done, excellent ending), and "On the Fundamental Mystery of Physics."

At that point I went looking for the correct address for letters to the editors, and in the process came across Lanette Neal's letter on

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the same topic (July, 1979) as Patricia's, as well as "On Cosmology" by Tony Rothman and L. C. Shepley.

I have nothing against the empirical sciences, nor against any other academic pursuits; however they do have their place, and I do not think SF is that place. When I want to read scholarly presentations I go to the proper journal. When I am looking for relaxation I go to *IA'sfm* or to something similar, such as *EQMM*. Really, Isaac, I think your response to Lanette misses the point: articles such as your editorial enhance the SF fan's enjoyment of SF, but these other articles are out of place in *IA'sfm*. I hope that your decision to include such material is not based on a lack of good SF material.

Thank you for an otherwise excellent publication.

Sincerely,

(Rev.) Louis P. Rogge, O. Carm.
Chicago IL

But many readers enjoy the articles and we must walk the tightrope. First names are fine.

—Isaac Asimov

Mr. Scithers & Dr. Asimov:

Being an Asimov & an SF fan, I have read every *IA'sfm* since Issue #1. I have enjoyed most of the stories that have appeared in the pages of your magazine and I have been an enthusiastic subscriber for just over a year. (Better late than never!)

In the September 1979 issue of *IA'sfm*, however, one story appeared that caused a change in my overall attitude toward SF short stories. Somewhere along the line I acquired a slightly jaded opinion of magazine SF — but Barry B. Longyear's "Enemy Mine" jolted me out of my stupor and caused me to sit up and take notice.

Not in recent memory has *any* story inspired me to laugh and cry (more than once) as I did while reading "Enemy Mine." The characters were so real to me — I felt I knew them and shared their experiences. Just finishing the story was, for me, a draining experience — I walked around for hours afterward feeling like a bowl of jello.

I'm sure you'll get other letters echoing my praise of "Enemy Mine," and I'm sure you don't need encouragement to let your readers see as much of Mr. Longyear's work in the future as we have seen in recent issues — but I just wanted to say thanks and keep up the good — no, great! — work.

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Sincerely,

Rita Hansen
Roscommon MI

PS — Please extend my thanks also to Mr. Longyear for the truly moving experience his work provided me.

Just to boast a little. "Enemy Mine" was sent me by George for advice on possible adjustment, and I think I was helpful. Who says I don't carry my weight in this magazine?

—Isaac Asimov

When time comes for nominations and votes on the HUGO awards (the Science Fiction Achievement Awards, given out by the World Science Fiction Conventions), you can again express your feeling about stories which you particularly like.

—George H. Scithers

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have been reading *IA'sfm* since issue one, and have wanted to write to you many times, but have only now found the time and the typewriter together at the same time.

First of all, I would like to say that I was finally moved to write to you by the September '79 issue of *IA'sfm*, which I believe to be *one* of the best you have ever put out, if not *the* best. "Enemy Mine" was absolutely beautiful. I think Barry B. Longyear deserves some kind of an award, say a Hugo/Nebula for best new writer maybe? "The Backward Look" was a little technical, but still very interesting. (The Black Windowers?) "Shawna, Ltd," and "Jenning's Operative Webster" were both good, but "Solo" moved a little slowly. I myself am a physics student, and I found "Fundamental Mystery . . ." quite interesting. How about doing a science fact article on the use of the laser as a weapon?

Now on to some general comments.

You really should have a talk with your billing computer. George is always shouting "SF dammit SF" but if you look at one of your own billing statements, they read: *Isaac Asimov's Sci-Fi Mag.* Really.

You might also take a look at your abbr. If you leave the apostrophe where it is, it means Isaac Asimov's fiction magazine. If you take it out, it means Isaac Asimov science fiction magazine. You just can't win. Not to mention the fact that "Science Fiction Mag-

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azine" is capitalized on the cover. Perhaps you could use *IA'sSFM*.

One last suggestion before I go. Why not print the addresss for letters at either the beginning or the end of the letters column. I still don't know if I sent this letter to the right place or not.

Thank you for listening, and congratulations on a fine magazine.

Sincerley Yours,

Chris Tannlund
24 So. 4th St.
Wood River IL 62095

There's no easy solution to the initial problem. I've been thinking of ISF myself (Isaac's Science Fiction) but I don't want people to forget my last name. IASF? ASF? (Now where have I heard that before?) Oh, well, let's have it George's way.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sir:

Barry Longyear's "Enemy Mine" in the September issue is a great story. I don't know enough to comment on the biological part of the story, but for some reason the whole story seemed so right. The ending left me pondering about our possible future relations with extraterrestrial races more than any other story I have ever read.

Please pass my compliments along to the author.

Sincerely,

Peter M. Keltch
Cherokee OK

We may spare a writer some slurs we hear about, but never the nice things. We will pass them on.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I enjoyed both Dr. Asimov's "The Backward Look" (I hope Lester del Rey will forgive him for his comment on page 29.) and J. E. Walters' "Jennings' Operative Webster." The other stories in the September 1979 issue of *IA'sfm* were also very good; but none of them can compare with "Enemy Mine," by the incomparable Barry Longyear. It is also, without a doubt, the best story you have published since I began reading your magazine. It has been said that science fiction is one of the best mediums for a writer who wishes

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to comment on current social and political issues, and stories like this prove just what a powerful tool it can be. If Barry Longyear continues to produce works of this high quality he will surely gain a reputation in the field of science fiction second only to that of the Good Doctor himself.

Expectantly yours,

Michael J. Mitchell
Box 6481
College Station TX 77840

Lester never gets mad, but he does *get even.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor & Company:

I hate writing fan letters of any sort, and I never have until your magazine caused me to break my rule of silence. In your mag, I even read the letters!

I thoroughly enjoy every story, (of course, some more than others) particularly those written by new writers. (My favorites are still those written by the Good Doctor himself.) In fact, I haven't missed an issue since July/August 1978, when I first discovered *IA'sfm* on a newstand in Richmond. The only reason I picked it up was because of Dr. Asimov's name on the cover, and I have chased down every issue since.

The real reason I am writing is because of an unusual phenomenon that has occured here in Patrick County. (Patience, friends, I know you've never heard of us.) There are only a very few of us here that admit to reading science fiction, yet, since your magazine has reached newstands here, every copy vanishes within a week!

Keep up the fantastic work!

Sincerely,

Leslie Raye Shelor
Rt. 3, Box 1
Stuart VA 24171

I trust they do not fall through a time-warp.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

In opening, I would like to complement you on your magazine,

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which seems to have recaptured the spirit of the early years of science fiction. I especially like the cover of the June issue, which seemed to be straight from the Good Doctor's Golden Age.

As in all magazines, there are stories which I like and stories I don't like. However, *IA'sfm* seems to have fewer of the latter and more of the former. My thanks to you both, Mr. Scithers and Dr. Asimov.

Now that the complements are out of the way, I'd like to ask you to send a copy of your manuscript format. Please find the number-ten envelope enclosed. Thank you, in advance. [Done!]

I hope you will hear more from me.

Sincerely,

John Richardson
Sherwood Park, Alberta

For some reason, covers (of any magazine) rarely get a good word. Thank you.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

September's was a good issue, especially Barry Longyear's "Enemy Mine." The idea was not particularly new, the alien was not very *alien*, but the story was great. I had tears in my eyes at end. Excellent.

I'm afraid that I was so wrapped up in "Jenning's Operative Webster" while reading it, that I forgot about all the ramifications of time-meddling. So, I was taken by surprise with the ending.

There were fewer short stories this time around, unfortunately. This was probably due to the Rothman science article.

Sincerely,

Tony Trull
St. Louis MO

I'm hoping "Enemy Mine" makes a good run for the Hugo and Nebula.

—Isaac Asimov

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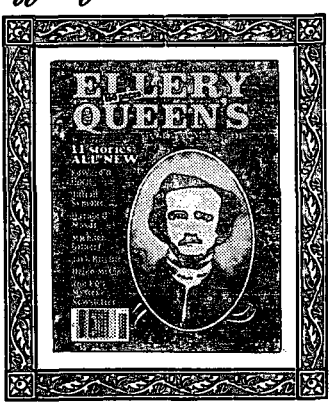

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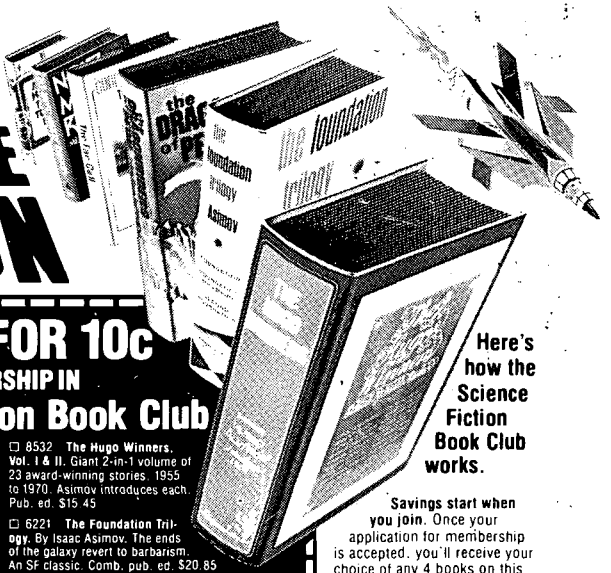

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